

Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World

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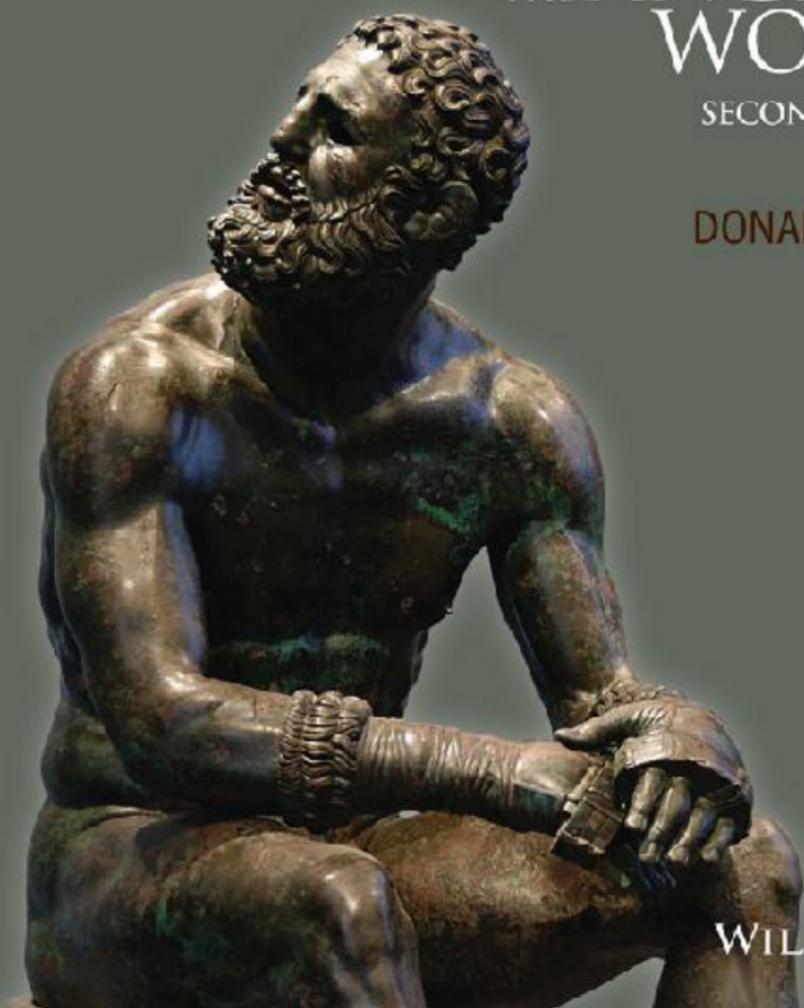
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SPORT & SPECTACLE

IN
THE ANCIENT
WORLD

SECOND EDITION

DONALD G. KYLE



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Cover image: Bronze statue of boxer from the Thermae of Constantine, 3rd--2nd centuries BC. Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome, Italy. Photo © Corbis

Preface and Acknowledgments

People often assume that historians of sport must be frustrated former athletes. Perhaps my youthful passions for sport and for antiquity moved me to study ancient sport. Perhaps it was useful that I played sports, enthusiastically if not that successfully. My games certainly taught me things about myself, about life, and about human nature. I remain convinced of the value of sport, especially team sports, for the health of individuals and society. Even as a youth, however, I realized that my recreation, my fun, might be on the playground but that my future lay elsewhere. I never imagined a career applying the life of the mind to the life of the body.

My generation witnessed Vietnam and the rise of modern terrorism, assassinations of inspiring leaders, the Munich Olympic massacre, Olympic boycotts and crises, and scandals of corruption and drugs in professional and college sport. We had to ask ourselves why humans remain aggressive and violent, why sport cannot be free of politics and economics, and why being the victorious competitor or fan seems so important. My generation saw sports news grow from the back page to a whole section of the newspaper. Sports became a larger part of the trinity of the evening newscast, and sports went from Monday Night Football and Hockey Night in Canada to whole channels of sport and more sport.

Why not study things that students find interesting and relevant? We have long followed our interests (e.g., democracy, art, and theater) back to antiquity. Spectacular sports now are more prominent than ever in our media and society. Untold millions associate the Modern Olympics, with their invented traditions and Hellenic trappings, with Ancient Greece. Images of Rome's Colosseum and Circus Maximus, of gladiators, beasts, and chariot races, remain pervasive and provocative, but are such topics beneath academics? Do people want to understand Rome's games or just to be shocked by them? History is often ugly or sad, but our actions and performances, for good or ill, reveal our human nature.

Ironically, the study of ancient sport has moved from the fringes to the mainstream of ancient studies. Sport and spectacle are ideal subjects for cultural, anthropological, and sociological studies of performance, festivals, ethnicity, identity, body imagery, and eros. Cultural discourse and the construction of social order unquestionably apply to sport and spectacle. Academics tend to privilege the mind over the body, but the physicality and passionate competitiveness of the Greeks and Romans cannot be denied.

When Blackwell invited me to contribute a book to their "Ancient Cultures" series, I suggested that my *Sport and Spectacle* (not *Sports and Spectacles*)

should go beyond Greece and include the Near East and Rome to allow me to investigate changes and continuities, contrasts, and comparisons. Deriving from my years of teaching and researching ancient sport, this book contains both new research and echoes of some of my previous works in reduced or revised forms. I hope that whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

This is definitely not a definitive work but rather an overview with a central theme and related sub-arguments. The scope is very broad, and this active field is still unfolding. Though not intended solely as a textbook, the work may have some value in the now proliferating courses on ancient sport. The notes and bibliography are selective, concentrating on reasonably accessible publications in English. Good bibliographical aids exist, and scholars now can pursue leads electronically. I want to make a case for the value of studying ancient sport, and I want to help non-specialist readers and undergraduates think more—or in new ways—about sport, spectacle, and antiquity.

Abbreviations herein follow the systems of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* and *L'Année Philologique* unless otherwise indicated (e.g., *IJHS* for the *International Journal of the History of Sport*; *JSH* for the *Journal of Sport History*; *Nikephoros* for *Nikephoros. Zeitschrift für Sport und Kultur im Altertum*; *Stadion* for *Stadion. Internationale Zeitschrift für Geschichte des Sports*). Translations of ancient works are mostly from the Loeb Classical Library and S.G. Miller's sourcebook (2012). Ancient Greek names and places generally are transliterated unless there is a well-known Latin form. For more illustrations, readers can consult books such as Bergmann and Kondoleon (1999), Köhne and Ewigleben (2000), Gabucci (2000), Miller (2004), and Valavanis (2004).

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This work is dedicated to the late Dr. Daniel J. Geagan for his dedication to teaching and scholarship.

Addendum to Preface

Why a second edition of this work after relatively few years? Some parts of the first edition could have been better, certainly, but the work was well received. The reviewers were kind, disagreeing at times but understanding that ancient sport and spectacle cannot be exhausted even in 400 pages. The book already is in use in courses on ancient sport history, and my arguments about the similarities between Greek sport and Roman spectacles (i.e., as ritualized cultural performances with emotional intensity) have found some level of acceptance.

The study (and teaching) of ancient sport, however, continues to grow and change dramatically. New approaches (e.g., comparative and sociological), continuing debates (e.g., about male and female competitors), new scholarship (e.g., by M. Carter, P. Christesen, K. Coleman, G. Fagan, D. Potter, D. Pritchard, and K. Welch), and exciting recent discoveries (e.g., inscriptions about games and burials of gladiators) all are enriching our understanding of the subject.

In addition, while coediting *A Companion to Sport and Spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity* (2014) with P. Christesen, I realized that a new edition could be more up to date, broader, and more “student friendly” (e.g., with clearer writing, chapter references, more images, more transliteration, and less citation of dated or non-English works).

I remain grateful to my wife Adeline and my sons Cameron and Colin for their patience and good humor. I earnestly thank P. Christesen for reading and improving all of my chapters in this second edition. I also thank Haze Humbert, Ashley McPhee, and Allison Kostka of Wiley-Blackwell, for their courteous assistance.

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Introduction: AncientSport History

I learned early on that sports is a part of life, that it is human life in microcosm, and that the virtues and flaws of the society exist in sports even as they exist everywhere else. I have viewed it as part of my function to reveal this in the course of my pursuit of every avenue of the sports beat.

Howard Cosell, *Cosell* (1974) 415

However propagandistic, Leni Riefenstahl's film *Olympia* (1938) about the 1936 Olympics was a triumph of cinematography and an inspiration for later sport documentaries and photography. With striking camera angles, iconic forms, and ageless symbols, the film turned athletic intensity into aesthetic delight. With scenes of misty mythological times, an athletic statue coming to life and hurling a discus, robust maidens dancing outdoors, and ancient ruins of Athens and Olympia, the film evokes ancient glory. A torch relay of handsome youths brings the talismanic fire of Classical Greece across miles and millennia to sanction the "Nazi" Olympics (see [Figure I.1](#)). Almost seamlessly, the film transports the viewer from the supposedly serene pure sport of Ancient Greece to the spectacle of the Berlin Olympics with its colossal stadium, masses of excited spectators, Roman symbols (e.g., eagles and military standards) of the Third Reich, and, of course, the emperor Hitler as the attentive patron, beaming as athletic envoys of nation after nation parade through and salute him.



Figure I.1 Torch relay runner in Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympiad* (1938).

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Riefenstahl's commissioned effort took manipulative myth making to new lengths; but, instead of recording a triumph of the fascist will, in spite of itself the spectacle immortalized Jesse Owens as an athletic hero. With its characteristic element of suspense, of unpredictability despite appearances and agendas, sport triumphed over despotism and racism. Through the beauty and brutality of various contests, and the human virtue of athletes of diverse

lands, sportsmanship survived on the field of play. The crowd, and in time the world, cheered even as the tyrant and his cultural and propaganda ministers watched. All were amazed. Everyone knew that something extraordinary, something spectacular, was taking place.

The 1936 Olympics and Riefenstahl's film were not the first or last combinations of sport and spectacle. When talented, determined, and charismatic athletes strive against each other, athletic competition becomes a spectacle. People want to watch, and performers want to be watched, to have others appreciate their efforts and hail their victories. Ancient spectacles similarly incorporated physical performances, many of them on a competitive basis with rules, officials, and prizes. It was the modern world that decided that the activities it differentiated as "sport" and "spectacle"—and the athletes and performers regarded as "sportsmen" and "professionals"—were incompatible, even as the competitions and competitors coalesced in ever-greater and more popular modern games at colleges and in the Modern Olympics.

With its heroes and hustlers, its victors and victims, sport—the playing, organizing, and watching of sports—was, is, and will remain undeniably popular and significant. Ancient and modern civilizations share an obsession with physical contests and public performances, but just what are "sport" and "spectacle," and how can they be studied and understood historically? How and why did sports and spectacles become so central, so moving, in the life of ancient Mediterranean civilizations? This work examines the prominence, forms, and functions of sports and spectacles in ancient societies, but first let me explain how the game should be played.

This is a study of ancient *sport*, not ancient *sports*, a sport history or a history of sport rather than a sports history or a history of sports. Traditional sports history tends to be event oriented, concentrating on individual sports and providing chronological narratives by leagues, teams, or players. Treating data (e.g., records and statistics) as facts, it favors anecdote above analysis. Instead, sport history pursues the phenomenon of sport over time, identifying and trying to explain its changes and continuity both causally and in context. It approaches ancient sport and spectacle not as isolated pastimes but as essential elements in social, civic, and religious life. Serious interdisciplinary sport history uses sport as a lens to examine human nature, societies, and cultures, not as an end in itself. Ancient sport historians have moved the field from antiquarianism to contextualization, from collection to collation, from enumeration to interpretation.¹ In recent decades, we have improved our understanding of ancient sport by questioning traditional assumptions, integrating new archaeological evidence, reexamining existing texts and artifacts, and applying anthropological, comparative, and social historical approaches.

Most historians of sport agree that sport, in some form, is a universal human

phenomenon, that agonism (competitiveness, rivalry, and aggressiveness) is fundamental to human nature, and that agonistic motifs abound in widely dispersed myths and literature.² Most also agree that sport exhibits significant adaptations and variations over time and space. The impulse to sport emerged early and remains rooted in human instincts and psychology, but different human groups, classes, cultures, societies, and civilizations practice and view sport in revealing and characteristic ways. Sport cannot be studied in isolation from its historical, social, and cultural context, and sport historians now speak of cultural constructions, tensions, negotiations, and discourse in sport and spectacle.

Ancient sport is a growing and exciting field in which scholarly advances and controversies abound. Disillusioned by excessive athleticism and the impact of ideologies on modern sport, demythologizing scholarship has shown that modern movements have abused the ancient games for their own ends, turning them into what they wished the games had been. Traditional studies now seem methodologically antiquarian or ideologically burdened with assumptions about amateurism, athleticism, classicism, idealism, Hellenism, Eurocentrism, and Olympism. As modern sport and the Modern Olympics evolve, scholars have reexamined traditional and supposedly ancient notions of sport for its own sake alone. A traditional rise and fall paradigm of pristine origins, golden age, and later decadence has been challenged. Now more ideologically self-conscious, we realize that the study of cultural adaptation over time involves continuity as well as change in the phenomenon and in modern interpretations.

Using interdisciplinary approaches from comparative, political, and symbolic anthropology, ethnology, sociology, New Historicism, and cultural and social history (e.g., on rituals, performance, initiation, hunting, processions, identity, and more),³ scholars have gone beyond the traditional concentrations—the Greek Olympics and the Roman Colosseum—to look at the sporting activities and spectacles of earlier Near Eastern peoples, the archaeology of the Bronze Age Mediterranean, the crucial transitional Hellenistic era, local games with their intriguing contests, rites of passage, and issues of class and gender, the emergence of Etruscan and Roman spectacles, the facilities and stagecraft of spectacles, and the persistence of Greek sport in the Roman Empire. Research on ancient sport and spectacle in the last generation has been so fertile, innovative, and international that there is a need for a synthetic and suggestive survey to attract and assist students and scholars who have not studied antiquity from this perspective.⁴

This survey of demythologizing therapeutic trends in ancient sport studies challenges old moralistic conventions including the claim that there was no sport before the Greeks and the simplistic contrasting of Greek sport and Roman spectacles as polar opposites. After downplaying or ignoring cultures before the Greeks, traditional studies applaud Greek sport as admirable, pure,

participatory, amateur, graceful, beautiful, noble, and inspirational, and they denounce Roman spectacles as decadent, vulgar, spectator, professional, brutal, inhumane, and debasing. Taking a broader approach, this work argues that sport and spectacle were not mutually exclusive but rather compatible and complementary. Especially at advanced levels, in ancient as in modern times, sport and spectacle have very much in common.

Why Sport History?

Sport is eminently worthy of study because it is both relevant and revealing. If historians want to understand fully the societies they study, it is imperative that we study people intently engaged in work, war, or play. Why does it seem so important that we win—or above all not lose—games? As if we were on a primordial hunt or a battleground, sport means something much more than just the activity itself. Also, the sports that groups embrace are not a matter of serendipity. Local versions of sport are adapted (or constructed) in interaction with cultural norms and tastes. Both sport and spectacle are central to the social life of groups and the operation of states.

From schoolchildren to weekend quarterbacks, from doctors to lawyers, from entrepreneurs to politicians, from the YMCA to the World Cup, sport permeates modern society. Sport is encouraged as a good thing, but it is fraught with problems. Violence in modern sport ranges from brutality on the field to riots in the stands and the streets. Sport is big business for the media and the stars, and franchises and stadiums affect the political and economic life of cities. Our modern vocabulary is rich in sporting imagery: home run, strike out, knockout, air ball, fumble, hat trick, Hail Mary, and more. The annual calendar of the United States is marked by sporting seasons, by opening day and the playoffs, with the championships of major sports as high holy days. In an age of high-definition big screen televisions and satellite broadcasts, we still talk of traditions, legends of the game, and the good old days.

ABC's famous television program, "The Wide World of Sport" was prophetic, for the modern world is widely sports crazy. The United States comes to a halt for the Super Bowl and the World Series, and campuses succumb to "March Madness." Canadians faithfully attend hockey games like church services, praying for the holy grail of the Stanley Cup. World Cup losses are national disasters in Europe and South America. Great Britain obsesses over Wimbledon, the Premiership, and the FA Cup; but it shares cricket with India and the Caribbean, and it shares rugby with Australia and South Africa. The world of sport is a microcosm of the world itself, complete with controversies about corruption, excessive commercialization, drugs, and free agents disloyal to the teams that hired them at exorbitant salaries. Mass spectator sports are so much a part of our modern culture, lifestyle, and

economy that sport history can be world history, national history, local history, social history, and also cultural history.

Our sports and our athletes represent us; they embody our identities and aspirations. In playing and watching sports, individuals, groups, and nations lay bare their characters and social values, as well as our common human nature. Situations of physical effort, stress, and rivalry show more about the character of people than is revealed in superficial and formal social settings. In the intensity of sport, we drop our veneer of socialization or civilization; we show our true natures, a human condition somewhere between animals and angels. We learn much about ourselves and others in examining how we prepare, compete, strain, and sweat—how we handle our greatest feats and defeats. In the “thrill of victory and the agony of defeat,” the allure of unfettered emotionalism and the spectacular appeal of absolute effort, the physicality and atavistic intensity of sport force us to ponder the depths of both our modernity and our ancient heritage. Sport is a window into ourselves and into the past.

Why ancient sport history?

Sport was as popular and significant, as relevant and revealing, in ancient times as it is today, and an appreciation of the role of sport and spectacle is fundamental to understanding ancient societies. Few customs were as essential to Greek or Roman ethnicity, to the emergence, distinctiveness, and exportation of their cultures, as their sports and spectacles.

Collectively, Greeks saw athletics as central to their ethnicity, something distinguishing them from “barbarians.” Unlike non-Greeks (Pl. *Resp.* 5.452c; Thuc. 1.6.5), Greek athletes were not ashamed to be seen in the nude. In Lucian’s *Anacharsis* (9–10, 16), a fictional dialogue of c. 170 CE, a non-Greek Scythian prince, despite the explanations of the Athenian sage Solon, simply cannot grasp why Greeks—dirty, weaponless, nude, and in the full sun—engaged in violent boxing and wrestling matches, all for the sake of a symbolic prize.

It would be hard to overstate the significance of athletics for the Greeks—what the contest, the victory, and the victor meant to them. Sporting concepts, including contest, prize, excellence, glory, and physical and moral beauty (*agon*, *athlon*, *arete*, *kleos*, *kalokagathia*), were central to Greek culture. Greeks saw sport as an index of manliness, a way to establish individual preeminence and social status, a way to honor gods and heroes in festivals, and as military conditioning, a therapeutic outlet for aggression, and part of a good education. To be recognized as a man of worth, one had to demonstrate especial skill or excellence, most effectively in war but also in other areas such as sport and hunting. The Greek male ethos of competition explains why Homer’s Odysseus was so enraged when a non-Greek insulted him as “not an

athlete” (see [Chapter 3](#)). It explains why extravagant impractical chariots were so prized, why boxing scars were worn with pride, and why Olympic victors were idolized. It also explains why athletic youths were eagerly courted and perhaps why women were excluded from even watching the Olympics.

Greek communities were proud of their athletes and athletic competitions, and any city-state (*polis*) worthy of the name had to have a gymnasium (*gymnasion*) as well as a theater (Paus. 10.4.1). Festivals and games promoted civic unity, and states lauded their victors with honors, rewards, and sometimes even heroization. Like their religion and language, sport was “Panhellenic” (i.e., shared by or common to Greeks); Greek colonists took their games with them to southern Italy and the Black Sea, and they kept their sport through Hellenistic and Roman regions and eras.

Enduring from the eighth century BCE to at least c. 400 CE, the Ancient Olympic Games were a showplace of Greek pride and identity. Greeks from all over the Mediterranean assembled at Olympia every four years for the games, as did famous Greek writers and artists. Later, Macedonians and Romans made announcements to Greeks assembled at the great games.

The Ancient Olympics were the most influential sporting phenomenon in Western Civilization, and they provided the inspiration for the Modern Olympics of 1896; but too many facile popular assumptions have been attached to that ancient pedigree. However inaccurately and anachronistically, the ancient games continue to be routinely associated with the Modern Olympics, even with the Winter Olympics. The resilience of Modern Olympic myths and rituals in the face of evidence and scholarship attesting ancient professionalism, corruption, and commercialism reveals much about modern culture and its notions of nostalgia, early purity, and decline. It remains tempting to hitch a ride on the Modern Olympic bandwagon but the historical relevance of the Ancient Olympics for the Modern Games has become hard to defend. Rather, the best reason for examining Greek sport lies in helping us understand ancient Greek culture and society, or the phenomenon of sport in general, and not in legitimizing the very different modern phenomenon. The Modern Olympics have become a cosmopolitan multicultural sporting spectacle, and we perhaps should expand our historical analogies from the Greek Olympics to include the spectacles of imperial Rome.

From chariot races to gladiatorial combats, spectacles were one of the most characteristic features of Roman civilization. Moderns want to trace the roots of our sport to Olympia, but we fear finding its roots in Rome. In their popularity, scale, and spectacular architecture, Rome’s mass entertainments seem very modern. The Romans were as passionate about their games as the Greeks, but, while we turn to the Greeks for inspiration, we have usually turned to Rome for warnings and moral lessons—often from an anachronistic Judeo-Christian viewpoint. Indeed, Rome offers insights into the allure of violent games and the mass psychology of crowds in an urban society, and

scholars have applied models from sociology and anthropology to the role of displays and performances in Roman civilization. Rome also offers insights into spectacles as instruments of cultural and political hierarchy and hegemony. Greeks exported their games to affirm their ethnic superiority, preferring to limit participation in athletics to Greeks; but the Roman Empire so effectively spread the arena and the circus that provincials came to accept new games, like new cults and emperors, as part of living in a Roman world.

Word Games: Conceptualizing Sport and Spectacle

Some clarification of terms is in order. “Spectacle” is derived directly from Latin, but “sport” is not an ancient word. From *disporter* in Old French, and only indirectly from Latin *de-portare* (to carry away), sport is at best a vague, loose, and inclusive term. That the word is non-ancient, however, does not mean that there were no applicable ancient phenomena. Rather, the modern term can encompass several ancient Greek words (e.g., *agon*, *athlos*, *athleuo*, *paizo*, *gumnazo*, and *diatribe*). For example, *agon* could refer to a contest, the site, or the crowd, and it was applied to competitions of all kinds, from wrestling to politics (Scanlon 1988, 2002, 7–9; Goldhill and Osborne 1999, 2–3). In Latin, *certamen* had similar uses, while *ludere*, *ludus*, and *lusus* applied to play, game, sport, pastime, diversion, or amusement.

In ancient Greek and in modern English, “athlete” (*athletes*) usually suggests serious physical training, competition for prizes, and the goal of victory. “Physical education” refers to the instruction and exercise of the young to assist the health and general development of the body, which in ancient (as in modern) times could overlap with military training or conditioning, and contests. “Recreation” or “leisure” (or play) applies to nonwork, relaxation, and rejuvenation with pleasure or fun as the goal. In modern parlance, “sport” is used as a general rubric for all these areas as well as hunting, dance, and even board games. Herein, however, “sport” will refer more narrowly to public physical activities, especially those with competitive elements, pursued for victory or the demonstration of skill.

Greeks and Romans also had several words for spectacle, show, or performance. In Greek, a *thea* or *theoria* (from *theaomai* or *theoreo*, to look on or view) was a sight, spectacle, viewing, wonder, or something worth seeing. A show or spectacle was a *theama* or *theoremata*, a spectator was a *theates*, *theamon*, or *theoros*, and a place of viewing was a *theatron*. In Latin, *spectaculum* meant a sight, spectacle, public performance, or stage play, as well as the facility (e.g., theater and amphitheater).⁵

Significantly, “athletics” (if not sport) and “spectacles” both have ancient pedigrees, and ancients did not see the activities and concepts as mutually exclusive or incompatible. Pericles praised (and the Old Oligarch criticized)

Athens' wealth of *diatribai*, meaning sports and spectacles from plays to torch races. The ancient writers Tertullian and Suetonius used *spectaculum* inclusively for many kinds of public performances.⁶ Greek and Roman epics contain both sport and spectacle. From an ancient perspective, "sport"—the modern term applied here to a cluster of ancient activities (notably athletics)—was a subset of "spectacle" (the modern and ancient term). Furthermore, many (Greek) sports were seen as spectacles (e.g., at Olympia), and many (Roman) spectacles were seen as sports (e.g., chariot racing). I clarify this neutral approach, based on ancient attitudes, because traditional sport scholarship used sport and spectacle as value-laden labels in a war of words.

While "athletics" and "spectacles" generally were positive terms to most ancients, in modern usage they often evoke different responses. Although our language is evolving with combined terms like "sporting spectacles" or "spectacular entertainments," people still apply traditional rhetorical distinctions to ancient physical entertainments. Sport (including athletics) is taken as natural, good, civilized, amateur, and manly, but spectacles are vulgar, decadent, professional, and dehumanizing.⁷ Within sport, a scale of goodness distinguishes amateur from professional sports and participatory from spectator sports. Without conscious irony, moderns speak of "professional sports" but "intercollegiate athletics" instead of "professional athletics" and "intercollegiate sports." Participatory sports are physical activities engaged in for recreation and the pleasure or healthy benefits of such participation. Their primary goal is the exertion and amusement of the participant. Participatory sport is amateur but often costs the participant money. Spectator sport may have similar activities but with more skills and more intense competition and with an emphasis on the amusement and comfort of spectators. Spectator sport is usually but not necessarily "professional" (i.e., with wages or significant material benefits for the athletes). Spectator sports, then, are "spectacles."

This work uses the terms sport, athletics, and spectacle, an imperfect mix of ancient–modern terminology, as devices to reduce the confusion of multiple ancient terms. In discussing sports and spectacles in both Greece and Rome, I concentrate on spectacular sporting contests in Greece and on Roman spectacles that include sporting elements. Such spectacular sports or sporting spectacles include various aspects: institutionalized public performances involving intense physical exertion and skill, rules or guidelines, management and supervision, some competitive aspects, some incentives, ritualized and non-mundane, held before an assembled audience, and with the suspense of non-predetermined outcomes. The action, force, and energy, compounded with the unpredictability of the outcome, which made ancient sporting contests spectacular (i.e., worth seeing, engaging, interactive), also made many spectacles sporting.

Pragmatically, I limit this study's focus somewhat. Music and gymnastics

were both part of early Greek education, but I will not focus on music, poetry, drama, or dance. Musical and dramatic performances requiring skill and physical exertion often were public and competitive, and athletic contests had theatricality, but music and theater were seen as artistic more than athletic. When Greek authors wrote of contests of “speed, strength, or wealth,” they meant athletic and equestrian contests. Some performances (e.g., military and choral dances) spanned categories, and music sometimes accompanied Greek sport (e.g., flutes) and Roman games (e.g., horns and water organs), but as supplements. Romans also distinguished theatrical shows, pantomimes, and mimes from chariot races and arena combats.

Challenges: Evidence, Chronology, and Modernism

By ancient standards, the popularity, pervasiveness, and longevity of ancient sport and spectacle left behind a relative wealth of documentation to support systemic analysis of broad patterns over ages and regions. From Homer to Suetonius, from Greek vases to Roman inscriptions, an abundance of literary and archaeological evidence exists, but the materials are diverse, disparate, and often fragmentary. Ancient sport historians must visualize a forest from a few scattered trees. Without box scores, record books, sport journalism, interviews, diaries, or tell-all biographies, we confront a millennia- and Mediterranean-wide jigsaw puzzle with missing pieces and no illustrated box cover.

Greek evidence

The evidence for Greek sport includes literature (history, myth, poetry, drama, and philosophy), sites, buildings and facilities, depictions in art (from vase paintings to statues), prizes, equipment, dedications, inscriptions, and even coins (Golden 1998, 46–73). Sculptors and vase painters routinely turned to sport, producing masterpieces such as the Charioteer of Delphi and Panathenaic amphoras. Archaeology and art history, especially epigraphy (and papyrology) and reexaminations of vase paintings and later texts, let us test and revise ancient literary accounts of how athletes trained, worshipped, competed, won and lost, and celebrated, and how they were motivated, rewarded, and commemorated.⁸

Although sport was a major part of Greek civilization, the few literary works specifically on sport (e.g., Lucian’s *Anacharsis* and Philostratus’ *Gymnastikos*) are limited and (with the exception of Pindar) mostly outside the traditional body of widely read classical works⁹; but sport was so much a part of Greek life that no genre is devoid of references or similes. Homer and Pindar, and their patrons and audiences, saw sport as worthy of poetry. Contests abound in Greek mythology, and funeral games were a stock element

of ancient epic. Historians, including Herodotus and Xenophon, provide details and insights, and tragedians and Aristophanes often use athletic metaphors. Physical education was an issue for Plato and Aristotle, whose schools arose in the Academy and Lyceum gymnasiums. From Roman imperial times, Plutarch uses sporting anecdotes as moral examples, and Pausanias' travel accounts provide an invaluable compendium of details. Classical philology continues to make essential clarifications of the role of sport in the vocabulary, verse, and vision of the Greeks and Romans.¹⁰

However aesthetically and rhetorically brilliant, literary sources on Greek sport present problems of (often very distant) hindsight, transmission, ideological biases, the influence of genre, context, moralizing, and credibility. Pindar was so busy applauding his clients that he often reveals more about mythology than about sport history.¹¹ Recently discovered Hellenistic victory epigrams from Posidippos record and applaud equestrian victories by male and female Ptolemaic royals (see [Chapter 11](#)). Pausanias is a treasury of information from monuments and inscriptions, but he also passes on legends and folklore, and he has his own postclassical Philhellenic (pro-Greek) perspective (see König 2005, 158–20; Newby 2005, 202–28). Literary evidence, of course, should be supplemented and tested with material evidence, which is often more independent and reliable.

Archaeology, both in its more popular form of discovering new finds and artifacts and in its other essential dimension of reevaluating previously discovered sites and objects, has been crucial to advancing our understanding of the proud, accomplished, and serious lives of ancient athletes.

Archaeological revisionism, no longer deferring to literary accounts, has been sobering and refreshing; and every year brings more exciting discoveries, from remnants of monumental facilities to pottery and inscriptions.

Careful study of inscriptions has revealed the operation of Greek athletic festivals in early, classical, and postclassical times, including their survival and proliferation within the Roman Empire. Valuable inscriptions include victor dedications from Olympia, prize and victor lists from Athens, gymnasium regulations from Macedon, details of Olympic-style games at Naples (see [Chapter 14](#)), and dedications and honorific inscriptions from municipal festivals in the Greek East under the Roman emperors. Especially exciting is the discovery of inscribed letters by Emperor Hadrian concerning the operation of Greek games in the Roman Empire (see [Chapter 15](#)).

Major excavations at the four sites of the great “Panhellenic Games” (Olympia, Delphi, Isthmia, and Nemea) have revealed the significance of space, structures, and spectatorship in ancient sport.¹² Dramatic finds at Nemea include a stadium complex with an entrance tunnel, starting mechanism (*hysplex*), and “locker room” (*apodyterion*); and excavation of the Roman-era remains at Olympia has extended the life of that sanctuary into late antiquity.

Roman evidence

From satirical poems to imperial histories, from inscribed decrees to epitaphs on tombstones, the volume and variety of textual evidence for Roman spectacles attest a phenomenon whose chronological and geographical scope spans the whole history and territory of the empire. Roman writers often use metaphors or examples from the games in works of history, philosophy, and panegyric. Famous passages from Cicero, Ovid, Juvenal, and others are often critical or satirical, but epigrams by Martial (see Coleman 2006) applaud the shows at the inauguration of the Flavian Amphitheater (or Colosseum) in 80 CE. Countless books on Roman life invoke Juvenal's indictment (10.78–81) of “bread and circuses” (*panem et circenses*) and his approval of “a sound mind in a sound body” (*mens sana in corpore sano*). Petronius and Apuleius reveal procedural details of the arena, and imperial histories by Suetonius and Dio use anecdotes about spectacles to characterize the reigns of rulers. Similarly but less reliably, the *Historia Augusta*, a collection of biographies of emperors of the second and third centuries CE, often details spectacles. Ironically, much valuable evidence comes from Christian authors (e.g., Tertullian and Novatian) who wrote highly charged polemics and martyrologies condemning Roman spectacles as idolatrous rites (see [Chapter 16](#)).

Archaeological sources (e.g., reliefs, mosaics, equipment, and inscriptions), most of which suggest pride in the games, assist our understanding of Roman events and practices. From household lamps, ceramics, and statuettes to coins and graffiti, physical evidence shows that spectacles played a major role in the festival calendar, the social life, and the public space of ancient Rome and its empire for over a millennium. Recent discoveries of graves and bones of gladiators in Turkey and England have attracted great interest (see [Chapter 15](#)). Architectural ruins of facilities, some of them still monumental and still in use, bear witness to the spread of Roman games from Spain to Austria. Again, epigraphy provides abundant testimony from the epitaphs of charioteers and gladiators to municipal regulations about games. An imperial edict of 19 CE from Larinum prescribes intended societal norms at public entertainments, and an edict of 177 CE on the prices of gladiators shows the attentiveness of emperors to spectacles (see [Chapter 15](#)).

Works of art, especially mosaics, have much to offer. For example, the Zliten mosaic from Tripolitania in North Africa graphically reveals many features of the arena, and the Magerius mosaic from Smirat in Tunisia (see [Figure 15.6](#)) vividly depicts a staged hunt of leopards and the organizer of the show.¹³ Nevertheless, it is difficult to reconstruct transitory and ephemeral events by examining artifacts and texts created to memorialize and not just record the action (see Bergmann and Kondoleon 1999, 9–24). Studying spectacles involves multiple forms of visual, nonverbal performance artifacts (e.g., props, images, souvenirs, funerary and processional reliefs, and domestic

mosaics) and physical sites associated with the production and memorialization of performances. Such artifacts seldom show exactly what the producer intended or what took place, but rather how the shows were remembered. Even if the producers' intentions are clear, we have very little evidence from the spectators themselves.

Chronology: dates and cycles

The chronological systems in the West (BCE–CE, or BC–AD) obviously are later constructs but useful ones. Instead of firm facts and dead dates, however, ancient sport history is surprisingly kinetic. It lives and moves, sometimes more than we like. We weave the chronology together with synchronisms but the tapestry can unravel. Much of our early chronology rests on Egyptian pharaonic dynasties and pottery sequences, and most Bronze Age dates are far from certain. Greece itself had many local systems of dating, often by the names of leaders (e.g., kings and magistrates).

For Greek sport we have relied, rather naively, on dating events by reference to years of the Olympic Games, which were correlated with the names of the victors in the men's sprint (*stadion*) race for each Olympiad (one set of games or the interval between the close of one games and the start of the next). The sophist Hippias of Elis wrote his *Olympic Victor List* around 400 BCE, Aristotle worked on a list and introduced the sequential numbering of Olympiads, and others added materials over time. Unfortunately, information on early victors and Olympiads often seems unreliable.

Hippias' victor list was doubted even in antiquity; Plutarch (*Num.* 1.4) charged that Hippias had no authoritative grounds for his list. Recent scholarship has strongly challenged the accuracy of Hippias' early names and details, as well as the reliability of later assignments of absolute dates to numbered Olympiads by synchronisms and other systems.¹⁴ Moreover, many archaeologists now distrust the traditional date of 776 BCE for the first Olympic Games. The weight of earlier scholarship creates resistance to a recalibration of Olympiad dating, but we must admit the limitations of early chronological records.

As more Greek athletic festivals developed, especially in the sixth century BCE (see [Chapter 7](#)), care was taken to synchronize the scheduling of games. With colonization and more games, states and sanctuaries tended to work around the Olympics and the "Panhellenic" games. This continued when the Hellenistic and Roman eras brought even more athletic festivals and "Iso-" games (alike or patterned on earlier hallowed games).

For Roman history, our chronology is better but not perfect. Rome probably was not founded in monumental urban fashion in 753 BCE, as legend claims, and uncertainties remain about dates for the monarchy and early Republic. A system of dating years according to the names of the consuls (elected chief

magistrates) provides increasingly accurate dates during the Republic, and Roman imperial chronology by years of the reigns of emperors is sound.

Our chronology for ancient sport history, then, is a vulnerable house of cards until the early sixth century for Greece and until the Middle Republic (264–133 BCE) for Rome, but recent discoveries and scholarship have improved our understanding of the records, calculations, schedules, and coordination involved in the world of ancient sport. That organizers used sophisticated astronomical calculations to help coordinate the scheduling of games was confirmed by recent research on the Antikythera mechanism (originally found in an ancient shipwreck in the Aegean Sea in 1901 CE). This astronomical device from c. 100 BCE uses bronze gears to calculate the cycles of the solar system. Amazed scholars realized that the mechanism could predict eclipses, and further examination with imaging technology revealed that a subsidiary “Olympiad” dial bears the inscribed names and calculates the cycle of the four great Panhellenic games (Freeth 2008; Freeth et al. 2008).¹⁵ Such calculation and coordination show the importance of games in the lives of sanctuaries and states. Even Roman emperors (notably Hadrian, see [Chapter 15](#)) were attentive to the efficient scheduling of contests throughout the empire.

Reception and modernism

Even with terms, evidence, and chronology at hand, ancient sport historians still face problems of perspective, reception, and perception.¹⁶ All the challenges that moderns face in seeking a sophisticated nuanced understanding of premodern society apply to ancient sport. Admittedly, total objectivity is impossible. As Thucydides (1.22.3) observed, different eyewitnesses to the same event see it differently, out of imperfect memory or partisanship. We are all cave-dwelling prisoners of our own cultures to a significant degree as we offer our impressions and imperfect conclusions.

Neither a fossilized positivist nor a fervent post-modernist, I view the historian of sport as an apologetically intrusive spectator of lost action. In trying to understand the past, in bringing our present mind to the evidence, we inevitably bend antiquity to our values and needs. We too often write history in the subjunctive, saying what could, might, or should have happened. We should be wary of anachronistic ideological agendas, of unconsciously imposing modern concerns, issues, and biases, in our reception and reconstruction of the distant and defenseless past.

While pursuing the sporting discourse between Greek and Roman cultures, we should not forget the ongoing discourse between modern and ancient thinking. If ancient and modern sport are significantly different, and if moderns conceptually think and optically watch in ways different from the ancients, perhaps the study of ancient sport seems doomed to a false start, or perhaps

our studies can help us distinguish truly ancient from modern or pseudo-ancient elements in our sport (see [Chapter 5](#) on Modern Olympic inventions).

Sport historians have long debated whether ancient and modern sport are fundamentally similar or different. Is sport as we now know it a thoroughly modern diversion or a stylized Paleolithic vestige? According to the “Modernist” school, associated with A. Guttmann, our ability to understand ancient sport is limited because the nature of modern sport, influenced by the industrial revolution, is fundamentally different in its secularity, specialization of roles, concern for equality and fairness, rationalization, bureaucratic organization, and quest for records.¹⁷ Critics of the Modernists feel ancient and modern sport share a singular universal nature as part of a continuum of sport from ancient to modern times, a ritualized but enduring heritage from mankind’s earliest emergence (see [Chapter 2](#)). Human nature is resilient but the Modernists have argued strongly that our games have changed to a significant degree with their technology of stagecraft, production, scoring, and record keeping, and with their ideological context and concerns about consistency and fairness in sport. Greeks and Romans had somewhat different systems of knowledge and different concepts of the self, the state, and the exercise of power. Also, the history of ancient sport suggests dramatic discontinuity in Late Antiquity with Christianity’s disdain of the body and the end of most ancient sports.

P. Christesen’s impressive (2012) study revives the Modernist debate with a broad and theoretical approach. Applying sport sociology to sport in Ancient Greece and Rome (and in modern Britain, Germany, the United States, and more), he argues that sport functions similarly in ancient and modern societies. Through sport, we are socialized and coerced into compliance with social values, and we come to terms with some level of autonomy. We learn to deal with instincts and impulses rooted in human nature and still operative in complex modern societies. In educational systems and social institutions at large, the experience of sport can help make us well-adjusted members of society and thus help maintain social order.

Sports and Spectacles as Cultural Performances

A promising approach, which recognizes the problems but endorses the value of studying sport and spectacle, is to consider such activities as “cultural performances.” Cultural and symbolic anthropology regards cultural performances, such as sports, dance, and drama, not merely as inconsequential entertainment but as distinct systems of meaning by which cultural orders (e.g., values, norms, and status relationships) are formulated, communicated, and reformulated (MacAloon 1984). Cultural performances, including oratory, processions, and games, are made by (and they reflect) culture, but they also make (contest, encode) culture, especially in “performance cultures” such as

Greece and Rome in which public competitions are prominent. Involving both metaphor and metamorphosis, cultural performances are fields of play with contestation, mimesis, and theatricality.¹⁸ Games can be seen as “forms of symbolic communication,” as a language as articulate as (and much faster than) the spoken word.¹⁹ Human action, especially ritualized, public, social action is communicative, and intensely physical competitions are dramatic performances with suspense and risk enhancing the experience.²⁰

Applications of theories of performance and spectacle from recent works on modern visual culture, with theoretical assumptions about media, mediation, and messages, and about gaze, gesture, and engagement, can be challenging; but it is common now to approach performances, rituals, and spectacles as crucial elements in the construction of identity, culture, and society. Tendencies to display and observation are rooted in human nature, and all societies have their own forms and forums for performance. Performance studies show that individuals and societies are constantly performing and presenting themselves²¹ and that spectacles always include some interaction and interrelationship (i.e., discourse, articulation, communication, negotiation, reciprocity, translation).

In the predominantly oral and visual cultures of antiquity sports and spectacles were communicative performances or displays that included mediation between viewers and viewed, actors and audiences. Isokrates (*Paneg.* 50.44) said that both athletes and spectators appreciate attention at contests; the spectators see the athletes struggling, and the athletes realize that people have assembled to watch them. Tertullian (*De spect.* 25) said that spectacles were places for “seeing and being seen.” The ancients held that the human eye had its own light, and they believed in the power of the outward gaze and the impact of arresting images. They did not consume their sport and spectacles anonymously in dark movie theaters or privately in their homes. Ancient spectatorship was public, personal, and interactive.

Greece and Rome: Positive and Negative Classicism

In studying ancient sport, we should be wary of confusing investigation with evaluation, understanding with adulation, comprehension with condemnation. Should we take sides to champion Greek glory and condemn Roman guilt? Should we applaud the brilliant accomplishments of Greece and denounce the brutal excesses of Rome? Should we endorse what P. Brantlinger (1983, 9–12, 31–2) calls “negative classicism,” an elitist view of history that sees extensions of mass or popular culture, as in spectator sports or mass participation in sports, as contributing to the decline of empires and cultures. Although ancient and modern sport spectacles have striking parallels (e.g., the obsession with winning, violence, and professionalism), we should not pillage

ancient sport for warnings about the moral collapse of modern societies and the decline and fall of world powers.

The supposedly exceptionally negative case of Roman spectacles has suffered by comparison with the supposedly exceptionally positive case of Greek sport. Modern biases have entrenched the myth of an incompatible antithetical dichotomy between the wise world of Greek sport and the wild world of Roman spectacle. Greek sport elevated but Roman spectacles debased human nature. The Hellenic purity of “man the player” (*Homo Ludens*) was corrupted by the Roman depravity of “man the killer” (*Homo Necans*). The glorious godlike Greeks were so much more civilized than the ruthless rabid Romans. The Greeks’ piety to their Olympian gods worked miracles, but the Romans’ impiety to Christians wrought massacres.

Until recently, we viewed Greek antiquity through a haze of romanticism. Works illustrated with scenes of bucolic Olympia, or serene Delphi on the heights of Mt. Parnassus, or the Parthenon on the Acropolis, presented Greek culture as natural, graceful, inspiring, and uplifting. The people who gave us democracy, philosophy, and the beauty of classical art and architecture held their games out of vitality and devotion, not out of boredom and lust. Rome was a bustling, dirty, unhealthy city. Its architecture was colossal, but it reeked of imperialism, autocracy, brutality, and decadence. Amateur Greek games were for cultured gentlemen, but professional Roman spectacles were for the idle vulgar mob.

For traditional Hellenists (admirers of ancient Greece), true ancient sport was Greek, noble, and familiar, so Roman games were crude and alien non-sports, or anti-sports. The conquering Romans supposedly were unwilling or unable to appreciate pure Greek sport,²² so their baser inclinations accelerated the corruption and decline of Greek sport. In epic movies and popular culture, Romans were obsessed with gladiators, blood, and murder in the arena. Symbolized by the Colosseum, spectacles were condemned by an enlightened minority of Romans (and by Christians), but to little effect. Cruel spectacles were a terminal defect, a mortal wound, in that high civilization. For J. Carcopino (1975, 254), “The amphitheatre demands more than reproach. It is beyond our understanding” But cannot one people’s sin be another people’s sport? As D. Sansone (1988, 13) remarks, “We must be prepared to accept the fact that there are, and have been, societies of people who regard the standards that we consider to be decisive in connection with sport of little or no importance.”

Sports as Spectacle, Spectacles as Sport

This work looks unapologetically at the broad spectrum of sport and spectacle before, during, and after the “golden ages” of Greece and Rome.²³ With their many public athletic contests, the Greeks were distinctively agonistic, but to

deny that there was sport in earlier cultures is chauvinistic. We now examine sport and competition in the broader contexts of Mediterranean, European, and comparative history (e.g., Fagan 2011; Fisher and van Wees 2011), and we recognize that sporting cultures traveled by trade and colonization, as well as by conquest and empire.

Historians still debate the origin(s) of sport (see [Chapter 2](#)), but clearly there was more assimilation than isolation in the Bronze Age, and the Hellenistic world into which Rome spread was cosmopolitan in sport and performance. We need to compare the Near East and Egypt to Greece and Rome, not just contrast Greece and Rome. Early Greece was heavily influenced from outside, and Hellenistic Greeks dominated large states, privileging some groups and excluding others through sport. Rome's vast empire incorporated and perpetuated a host of sports and spectacles. To deny that Roman spectacles had any sporting qualities, or that Greek sports had spectacular features, is anachronistic Hellenism. Moving beyond the centers and the canon (the capitals, classical eras, and literary classics), ancient sport studies are taking the Greeks down from their pedestals and raising the Romans from their ruins.

Questions arise. Were the Greeks and Romans so good or so bad, so one-dimensional, or so different? Why did Greeks spend the time and money to travel to remote Olympia, and why did Romans of all stations flock to shows? Why were many of antiquity's most famous sites and architecturally original structures venues for sports and spectacles, for exercise and recreation? How very different was the Roman circus, with its facilities, fans, and slaves, from the Greek hippodrome? Were the Greek officials—magistrates and monarchs—who organized, supervised, and financed athletic festivals so very different (in their motives, methods, pressures, and rewards) from Roman politicians and emperors? Did Greek boxers, who fought until injured or forced to submit, and sometimes died in the process, have nothing (e.g., training, skill, and virtue) in common with gladiators and beast fighters? Did not athletes, charioteers, and gladiators all aspire to victory, fame, and prizes in some form? Did not they all want to be memorialized and remembered as competitors and combatants? Why did both Greek and Roman society at large turn victors into heroes and stars, even as some intellectuals lamented the wasted resources and misplaced adulation? Why, after initial mutual suspicion, did Greeks and Romans come to accept and endorse each other's games to a large degree?

The Greek Olympics and other Panhellenic Games were grand spectacles complete with violence, corruption, erotic overtones, merchandising, and other fringe activities, and political and economic exploitation; and Roman spectacles on their own terms—especially the circus but even the gladiatorial combats—included training, talent, dedication, and ideological integrity (e.g., procedures, values, and virtues). A closer look at the evidence shows that the Greeks came to appreciate Roman spectacles as they spread to the Hellenistic

East and that Romans were capable of appreciating the sports of the stadium as well as the spectacles of the arena. Greek and Roman games had major differences but also similarities and cultural ties; both were popular, physical, and pagan. They drew competitors and spectators from afar because Greeks and Romans shared a passionate enthusiasm for sport. The Olympics and the games at Rome were just pinnacles of vast networks of local games and shows. Although some might prefer to perceive Greek sport through the gauze of ennobling Pindaric lyric, realistically, the appeal of ancient sport, both Greek and Roman, was visual and visceral.

Recent scholarship in fact has started to view Greek sports as spectacles, and it has become more acceptable to see Roman spectacles as sport or leisure—from the perspectives of the spectators and even many of the participants. Roman games, including those of the arena, do fulfill a broad definition of sport as a means whereby members of a society disport or entertain themselves.²⁴ Scholarship, including J. Toner's perceptive (1995) study, has become more balanced and sophisticated in approaching Roman spectacles, of all kinds, within the broader context of leisure and entertainment. Some still balk at the notion of violent spectacles as sport or as sporting, but their prominence in Roman leisure and recreation cannot be denied any more than we can deny the prominence of violence—symbolic, fake, virtual, and real—in modern sport and entertainment.²⁵ Roman sport was part of Roman civilization and also part of the broader history of sport in the ancient world; it was not an aberration unrelated to earlier sport or human nature.²⁶

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Notes

- 1 Research accelerated in the 1980s with bibliographies and surveys: Weiler and Ulf (1988); Kyle (1983, 7–34); Scanlon (1984); Crowther (1985, 1990), followed by Kyle (1998); König (2005, 22–35, 2010, 1–16). Other useful resources include the annual surveys in *Nikephoros*, a journal on ancient sport; Crowther (2004); Golden (2004). Recent collections of essays include Nelis-Clément and Roddaz (2008); Wilmott (2009); König (2010); Papakonstantinou (2010); Fisher and van Wees (2011); Coleman and Nelis-Clément (2012); Christesen and Kyle (2014).
- 2 For example, Weiler and Ulf (1981); Poliakoff (1987, 134–47); Fisher and van Wees (2011).
- 3 Recent historiographical treatments include Kyle (2010a); Toner (1995); Weiler (2014).
- 4 Courses, texts, and sourcebooks on ancient sport have proliferated. For Greece Miller offers both the best textbook (2004) and sourcebook (2012) surpassing Sweet (1987) and Tyrrell (2004). On Rome, Dunkle (2008) reliably treats arena and circus spectacles, as does Futrell’s (2006) sourcebook, surpassing Mahoney (2001). Crowther (2007), Dodge (2011), and Newby (2006) are brief texts suitable for sections of courses but Potter (2012) is more substantial for courses on ancient sport and spectacle.
- 5 Bergmann (1999) 16, defines “spectacle” broadly to include a wide variety of performances and venues, of actions and places, of things seen and places where they were seen.
- 6 Tertullian’s work on spectacles condemned performances in the stadium, circus, amphitheater, and theater. Suetonius’ lost work, the *Ludicra Historia*, mentioned by Tertullian, *De spect.* 5.8 and Suda s.v., included both Greek and Roman contests.
- 7 For example, Gardiner’s work, a popular textbook for decades, uses “professional” and “spectacular” pejoratively (1930, 99–116).

- 8 See Golden (1998, 2008); Scanlon (2002); Miller (2004); König (2005); Newby (2005); Christesen (2012); Potter (2012); Pritchard (2013).
- 9 On these and other relevant works of Imperial literature, see König's sophisticated (2005) work.
- 10 Larmour (1999) shows that sport was a common cultural currency in metaphors, slang, and narrative in drama. Other studies of genres or authors include Brown (1983); Kurke (1991); König (2005); Coleman (2006); Lovatt (2006); McDevitt (2009); Kyle (2010b).
- 11 Hornblower and Morgan (2007) is essential reading on the contexts and influence of Pindar's poems.
- 12 For example, Romano (1993); Morgan (1990); Sinn (2000); Miller (2004a, 2004b); Valavanis (2004); Scott (2010). For valuable essays, see Raschke (1988); Tzachou-Alexandri (1989); Phillips and Pritchard (2003); Crowther (2004).
- 13 Dunbabin (1978, 17–18, 65–87); Blanchard-Lemée, et al. (1996, 189–217).
- 14 See Shaw (2003) and Christesen's definitive study (2007), noted in Chapter 5.
- 15 For illustrations and bibliography, see Edmunds, M. et al. The Antikythera Mechanism research project (<http://www.antikythera-mechanism.gr>).
- 16 As König (2010, 16) comments: "Any representation of athletic activity is necessarily a tendentious attempt to impose a particular viewpoint." Writing about athletic activity is "...often an exercise of self-representation and self-definition for ancient writers."
- 17 Guttmann (1978, 15–55). Cf. Sansone (1988); Carter and Krüger (1990); Young (1996).
- 18 Goldhill and Osborne (1999, 1–29) explain performance studies as a discipline of cultural studies with mixed origins in theater, anthropology, sociology, psychology, rhetoric, and linguistics.
- 19 Bergmann (1999, 9–35) presents varied activities and multiple contexts as all part of a single phenomenon, a common tradition of thought, and a visual, symbolic performative art or language of spectacle from Etruscan and Hellenistic through Roman times.
- 20 Scholars increasingly apply "somatology" or the study of the display, images, and meanings of ancient bodies, especially nude males, as symbolic cultural "texts" (e.g., Stewart (1997); Osborne (2010)). Scanlon (2002) sets the Greek body in the context of eros, education, status, and socialization. Also, modern sport sociological theories (e.g., hegemony,

functionalism) give insights on the treatment (e.g., diet, medical care, or abuse), disciplining, and display of bodies to assist (or challenge) social order; König (2005, 97–157); Christesen (2012, 12–28).

- 21 For example, Bell (2004) examines the political dimensions of interactions between audiences and ancient political figures as they perform and present themselves, notably at spectacles and shows. German (2005) applies performance theory to Late Bronze Age images of performances including bull leaping.
- 22 For example, Gardiner (1930, 49) claimed Italians “had long been brutalized by gladiatorial shows and craved an excitement which pure athletics could not give.”
- 23 European ancient sport historians, e.g., Weiler and Ulf (1981); Decker and Thuillier (2004), have been models in broadening research. Guttman (2004) is a work of astounding scope.
- 24 Defining sport thus Harris (1972, 13) includes Roman chariot racing and Greek sport under Rome, but he excludes arena spectacles. Anderson (1985) and Poliakoff (1987) exclude Roman gladiatorial and hunting spectacles on the grounds of morality and purpose.
- 25 Sansone (1988, 116–17) sees Roman gladiatorial fights as simply an intensified form of “sport.” Golden (2004, ix, 2008, 68–104), includes gladiatorial combat because it had competitive elements similar to Greek athletics. On gladiators as athletes, see Chapter 15.
- 26 Fagan (2011) sees the allure of staged violence as part of human psychology. Potter (2010, 2012) approaches both Greek sports and Roman spectacles as entertainments with interactions among performers, producers, and audiences.

1

Origins and Essences: Early Sport and Spectacle

Sports are a human universal, appearing in every culture, past and present. But every culture has its own definitions of sport.

A. Guttmann, *Sports: The First Five Millennia*, 1

Speculations abound but the origins and prehistory of sport remain obscure because the phenomenon long predates clear and substantial evidence for itself. Anthropology shows an inclination to sport (i.e., play, competitiveness) to be aboriginal and universal in humans,¹ but sport historians disagree about whether sport grew out of or into ritual, and whether sport in essence is practical, autotelic (an end in itself), ludic (playful), or symbolic. Debate about the essence of sport continues because debate about the essence of human nature continues. The emergence of civilizations, however, brings more explicit physical evidence and written sources for institutionalized sport (Olivová 1984, 10–19; Ulf 1988, 14–73).

J. Huizinga's classic *Homo Ludens* suggests that play preceded human culture and was essential to the socialization of humans, and that games were reconciliatory surrogates for war, death, and the challenges of life (Huizinga 1950, 9–10, 89–104; cf. Guttmann 1978, 1–14). Human competitiveness does seem to be an instinctual matter of survival and propagation. Paleolithic humans probably used physical performances and contests to prepare themselves for hunting, to defend themselves or their territory, for leadership selection and the establishment of social hierarchy, as boundary display, and in mating rituals and contests (see Miller 2001, 253–6, 335–7).

Studies of early Greek sport, noting connections between contests and religion or funerals, extrapolate general origins for all sport. Perhaps human games entertained anthropomorphic gods, or funeral games expiated bloodguilt. Anthropological theories are more inclined to relate games to fertility or vegetation cults, or to rites of passage (e.g., initiations and funerals).² Somehow instinctual acts became ritualized social institutions that provided social interaction and catharsis. In societies, sport was a form of performance, a social mechanism that assisted both social order and social change. In time, early cities and soon territorial empires used physical performances for military ends (for the training, review, and testing of soldiers)³ as political displays of power, and as communications and reinforcements of royal and imperial control.

Hunting rituals and sport

Paleolithic cave paintings suggest that man's fascination with animals is aboriginal, and apparently our long existence as hunters and carnivores imprinted impulses on our psychology.⁴ Confrontations with beasts were essential to survival, and protecting others by fighting beasts and procuring food by hunting were associated with commensality (group eating) and mating hierarchies. Hunting has remained a heavily ritualized form of masculine display even in the modern world.⁵

D. Sansone (1988) argues that all sport, ancient and modern, has a single essence or fundamental nature as the “ritual sacrifice of physical energy.” Applying ethology (the study of instinctive impulses in human nature) and studies of ritual and sacrifice, he traces the origins of Greek and all sport back to ritualized patterns of behavior derived ultimately from Paleolithic hunters. He suggests that when man sacrificed domesticated animals in the Neolithic Era, the earlier ritual element of expended energy, which went into the Paleolithic hunt but was no longer necessary, was still sacrificed—in the form of sport—as an enduring ritual and an offering to the gods. By a process of ritualization, the once-productive hunting actions continued, became stylized, and took on new communicative functions as sport. The hunter/athlete who best expended or sacrificed energy won the greatest honor. Sansone feels that hunting rituals explain features of Greek sport, such as sacred wreaths (as vestigial survivals from the camouflaging headdresses and screens worn by early hunters) and nudity (as an intensification of the limited clothing the primitive hunter wore to reduce his scent), and also features of modern sport, such as animal names for teams.

Our modern enthusiasm for sport may recall that of the ancient Greeks, but in antiquity the Greeks were seen as unusual in their sporting passions and practices. If sport had (and has) a single universal nature, Greek features such as nudity and crowns should have been universal and not particular to Greek culture. And so the debate continues, because theories cannot resolve the complexities of human nature or the limitations of prehistoric evidence, because modern sport may be fundamentally different, and because sport is now so culturally diverse that agreement on a single essence or function seems unlikely.

Agonism: the unique Greek?

Claims that the Greeks had a unique competitive or “agonistic” spirit, and that only they could have raised sport to the level of athletic festivals, went unchallenged for many decades. E.N. Gardiner opened his *Athletics of the Ancient World* (1930, 1) by declaring that, “The story of ancient athletics is the story of Greek athletics. The Greeks, as far as we know, were the only truly athletic nation of antiquity.” Indeed, competitiveness was fundamental to

the heroic or aristocratic code of early Greece. In Homer (*Il.* 6.208, 11.784, see [Chapter 3](#)), their fathers told Glaukos and Achilles to “always be the best” and to “excel above others.” Greeks remained intensely competitive in virtually every aspect of their public life, from war to sport and politics.

Although still dear to some Hellenists, the ethnically exclusivist idea of the unique Greek has been undermined by comparative anthropological studies. European ancient sport historians took the lead in challenging the idea that the ancient Greeks invented sport. Weiler’s analysis (1974) of the motif of contest or competition (*agon*) in Greek myth and legend notes earlier versions of such myths. Weiler and Ulf’s comparative approach shows that competitiveness was a typical aspect of early societies in general (Weiler and Ulf 1988; also see Scanlon 1983). Scholars now agree that there were sporting precursors in earlier societies, and recent works try to identify pre-Greek athletic contests (e.g., Decker 2004).

C. Ulf (2011) argues that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars of Greek sport (e.g., E. Curtius and J. Burckhardt) projected modern ideological notions of competition (taken from economic theory in the context of industrialization) onto the Greeks, fashioning them as uniquely competitive creators of a distinctively “agonistic” culture. Certainly the Greeks were competitive, but competition could possibly be a “general human drive” (102).⁶

Though no longer magically unique, the Greeks remain distinctive for the degree to which they institutionalized athletics with regular festivals, prizes, and facilities (Poliakoff 1987, 18–19, 107–12). The Greeks also developed a genre of athletic victory poems and idealized the nude athlete in their art.

Mesopotamian Combat Sports and Running

From the early third millennium BCE on, at roughly the same time as Egypt, Mesopotamian civilization had public physical performances that are recognizable as sports.⁷ Evidentiary difficulties obscure exact details about some performers, contexts, and intentions, but reliefs, seals, and artwork show that Mesopotamians were familiar with wrestling, boxing (see [Figure 1.1](#)), and a form of belt wrestling. They also had sporting or athletic activities related to festivals and kingship, and their kings understood the value of spectacular performances and flattering depictions of themselves in art and literature.



Figure 1.1 Mesopotamian boxing relief of c. 2000 BCE. Tell Asram. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

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The Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* describes a struggle between Gilgamesh, king of Uruk (c. 2700), and his rival Enkidu, with apparent wrestling imagery⁸:

[Enkidu blocks Gilgamesh from entering a bridal house]

Enkidu barred the gate with his foot,

They seized each other,

They bent down like expert [wrestlers],

They destroyed the doorpost, the wall shook.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu were holding each other,

...

Gilgamesh bent [his one knee],

With the [other] foot on the ground.

Such a physical ordeal, combat, or demonstration of strength and skill was a claim to leadership, and in literature it could signal a hero's character development.

Various Mesopotamian texts from Ur III and Old Babylon suggest physical performances associated with festivals (or possibly weddings) at royal courts.⁹ In a legal text from Ur III of c. 2000 BCE, a defeated wrestler quarrels with and murders his opponent. An Assyrian astrological text from Assur reads: "in the Month of Gilgamesh for nine days men contest in wrestling and athletics [possibly feats of strength or acrobatics?] in their city quarters."¹⁰ A text from Assur of c. 1200, but relevant to Old Babylonian times (1792–1550 BCE), mentions trials of strength by "athletes" ("the strong ones") before a deity; and administrative texts from Ur III (c. 2135–2026 BCE) mention rations of beer, lambs, and flour to be brought to the "house of the athletes." These "athletes" seem to be an identifiable group, but they might also be termed "performers" or "strongmen." The evidence shows state-supported performances associated with festivals but not necessarily athletic prize festivals *per se*.

Mesopotamian kings carefully arranged symbolic demonstrations of their prowess to affirm their legitimacy as rulers, warriors, and hunters. Shulgi, king of Ur III (c. 2094–2047 BCE), supposedly performed physical feats in the courtyard of the temple at Ur, and hymns credit him with feats of "athletics and trials of strength" including running a round trip between two religious festivals some 100 miles apart in one day.¹¹

In trials of strength and athletics I am [foremost],

In the great courtyard, as on the battlefield,

Who can oppose me?

...

I am the one who is strongest

and most skilled in athletics and trials of strength.

That my name be established unto distant days, ...

...

I, the runner, rose in my strength, all set for the course, from Nippur to Ur,
I resolved to traverse it as if it were [but a distance] of one “double hour.”
Like a lion that wearies not of its virility I arose,
Put on a girdle (?) about my loins,
Swung my arms like a dove feverishly fleeing a snake,
Spread wide the knees like an Anzu bird with eyes lifted toward the mountain.

Note that the trials of strength and athletics are analogized with warfare and associated with the courtyard of the temple, that the king wears a loincloth, and that no rival runners are mentioned. By his long distance running, the king marked his territory and claimed his throne and realm. Similar physical feats and festivals served similar ends in Egypt.

Egypt: Hunting and Sporting Pharaohs

Enthusiasm for physical recreation was not a Greek preserve. Early Egypt lacked athletic festivals along Greek lines, but Egyptians, especially nobles and soldiers, had a variety of sports and games: combat sports, running, hunting, strenuous performances by female dancers or acrobats, and ball and board games. W. Decker (1992) details evidence showing that ancient Egyptians watched or participated in their own forms of sports and spectacles, including ritual runs by the pharaoh in the Sed festival, hunting expeditions, and archery and chariot demonstrations in the New Kingdom (c. 1566–1087 BCE).¹²

Evidence and imagery

From hieroglyphics to wall paintings to sports equipment (e.g., balls and throwing sticks), evidence for Egyptian sport comes mostly from tombs of kings and nobles or from temple monuments, so it concentrates on the elite and reflects official doctrine. In Egyptian royal dogma, the pharaoh was the guarantor of life and bounty for Egypt; he was a god who could not fail in war or in his rule. The pharaoh's unique position as a living god evolved with Egypt's shift from ethnocentric security to imperialism. Pharaohs of the Old Kingdom (c. 2770–2200) were presented as strong and serene in their divinity, but New Kingdom pharaohs were expected to demonstrate physicality and skills through spectacular feats. Artistic depictions of their activities often were more symbolic or metaphorical than factually accurate. The Egyptians could not contemplate pharaonic infirmity of will or loss of power. In sport, then, he could have no rivals, and he always succeeded or won. Sporting notions of fair and open competition did not apply. As with Shulgi, royal sporting exploits became part of official and religious doctrine.

The hyperbolic and absolutist claims of pharaonic sources were fashioned by dogma, symbolism, and mythologizing.

Sed festivals

The Sed or jubilee festival, in which the pharaoh made a circuit on foot around turn-posts or markers, is attested in art and architecture from the third millennium on. Decker identifies markers, *c.* 55 m apart, in the pyramid complex of Djoser (*c.* 2600 BCE) as “the world’s oldest sports facility,” although “... the running track was an element of the royal funerary complex and not the stage for the actual run that took place during the Festival of Sed.” As he explains, the run was “the act and ritual demonstration of a unique person, the king.”¹³ Involving no other competitors and no great exertion, this was a performance, not an endurance race. The run took place 30 years into a king’s reign, and aged pharaohs performed it. The completion of the circuit achieved its ritual purpose: an original demonstration of the king’s physical qualifications for rule became a symbolic circuit of territory and a ritual rejuvenation.

Beni Hasan and displays

Over 200 painted scenes of wrestling (and female acrobatics and other activities) appear in the tombs (see [Figure 1.2](#)) of nomarchs (a local officials) at the site of Beni Hasan from the Middle Kingdom (*c.* 2000 BCE), and other scenes of wrestling and stick fighting are known from tombs in the New Kingdom. Paintings of combatants clearly attest skills in a variety of techniques and holds. Wearing loincloths, the participants probably were soldiers performing part of their military training. Elsewhere, in New Kingdom carvings from Medinet Habu, Egyptian wrestlers in the presence of the pharaoh always defeat foreigners, suggesting that the fights were depicted to uphold the message of Egyptian superiority. Similarly, scenes of strike-and-parry stick fighting before the pharaoh suggest attention to military preparedness rather than athletic competitions.¹⁴



Figure 1.2 Egyptian wrestling scenes, from the tomb of Nomarch Hotep, Beni Hasan, Egypt, c. 2000 BCE. akg-images/Erich Lessing.

Sporting pharaohs of the New Kingdom

For a millennium and a half, early Egypt shows continuity in its sport, from Sed runs to depictions of wrestlers in tombs to a love of hunting and fishing, but the Second Intermediate Period (c. 1786–1560) brought changes. After the Hyksos invaded and introduced war chariots and composite bows, New Kingdom pharaohs (c. 1570–1085 BCE; Dynasties 17–20) became militaristic and imperialistic. Pharaohs of the eighteenth dynasty met the need to appear robust as warrior-hunters for military credibility (Davies 1935; Decker 1992, 34–46). The trend peaked with Amenophis II but declined in the nineteenth to twentieth dynasties.

Several New Kingdom pharaohs were sportsmen in the sense that they trained to acquire physical fitness and military skills, and they gave ceremonial demonstrations of chariot driving, horsemanship, and archery. The Stele of Tuthmosis III (1482–1450) (Decker 1992, 36–7 with trans.) from Erment proclaims:

He shoots at a copper plate because every (wooden target) is pierced like papyrus. His Majesty provided an example of this at the Temple of Amon with a target of hammered copper, three fingers (thick). His arrow was in the target which it struck. Thereby he (the king) allowed a penetration three hand's breadths beyond so that his progeny might wish for the strength of his arms in bravery and force. I say to you (?), in truth and without falsehood, what he did in view of the entire army without

boastfulness.

Note that the archery took place at a temple with the army as spectators.

The Sphinx Stele of Amenophis II (1427–1400) (Decker 1992, 37–9 with trans.) claims that the king, after drawing 300 bows, was a perfect shot even from a moving chariot. He shot four arrows as he drove by, and all four passed through copper ingot targets:

He strode upon the northern archery ground and found prepared for him four targets of Asian copper, a hand's breadth thick. Twenty ells (c. 10 meters) was the distance from one post to the next. His Majesty appeared in his chariot like the god Month [god of war] in his strength. He seized his bow and grasped four arrows at once. He drove off and shot like Month in his battle dress, and his arrows penetrated the targets. Then he attacked the next post. This was a deed never done before ... one arrow was shot at an ingot of copper, and it transfixes the plate and fell to the ground on the other side. [An impossible feat] except for the king, radiantly mighty, whom Amon [god of Thebes] has made strong, King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Amenophis II, heroic as Month.

Another piece of imperial propaganda legitimizing the king and reassuring his subjects, this purported feat of archery from a chariot, set in a special archery ground, presents the king as godly, divinely favored, and infallible. The Egyptian conception of history, however, dispensed with strict historicity, and the performance may have symbolized the domination of Asian peoples (Decker 1992, 44).

Most New Kingdom pharaohs, with the exception of Akhenaton, were represented in art as militarily aggressive and personally vigorous, and performances of combat sports by soldiers were held at court. Even the boy pharaoh Tutankhamon was buried with images of hunting lions and hippos and driving chariots (El Habashi 1992). Heavily stylized and symbolic, Egyptian imperial art and texts communicated messages of pharaonic power and blessing rather than attempting to record actual events accurately. Pharaonic feats probably involved impressive skills acquired by training, but in these carefully orchestrated spectacles the king alone was the unfailing star. At most, he competed against the feats of earlier pharaohs, thereby leading to increasingly exaggerated claims.

Egyptian athletics?

The case for Egyptian athletics depends upon limited or late evidence. A fragmentary inscription from near Luxor says that, after shooting an arrow that protruded 7/9ths of its shaft through a copper ingot target, Amenophis II challenged others and offered (unspecified) prizes for matching his performance: "Whoever transfixes this target to the extent His Majesty's

arrow did, to him belongs these things.” Admitting that this is a unique text inconsistent with Egyptian ideology, Decker (1992, 41–2) suggests that the king could risk his prestige “because there was, in reality, no risk at all.” Even if the king made such a challenge, no subject would dare accept it.

Decker (1992, 62–6, with trans.) hails the “Running Stele of Taharqa” of c. 685 BCE from the Nubian twenty-fifth dynasty as “irrefutable evidence of an Egyptian running contest.”

His Majesty commanded that a stele be erected entitled “Running Practice for the Army of the Son of the Sun Taharqa, may he live forever.” His Majesty commanded that his army, raised on his behalf, daily run (in) its five (sections).

His Majesty said: “... There is none among my army who is not toughened for battle, no weakling who acts as a commander of mine. The king goes in person to Bia to inspect the good order of his army. They come like the coming of the wind, like falcons who beat the air with their wings. ... The king himself is like Month, a powerful one, unequaled by any in his army. ...”

The king himself was in his chariot to inspire the running of his army. He ran with them at the back of the desert of Memphis in the hour “She Has Given Satisfaction.” They reached the Fayum in the hour “Sunrise.” They returned to the palace in the hour “She Defends Her Master.” He distinguished the first among them to arrive and arranged for him eat and drink with his bodyguard. He distinguished those others who were just behind him and rewarded them with all manner of things. For his Majesty loved the work of battle, for which they were selected.

Here, the king orders soldiers to run from Memphis to the Fayum and back (c. 100 km in nine hours). He accompanies them in a chariot but joins them in running for part of the distance, and he offers awards: a ceremonial meal with his bodyguard for the victor and unspecified prizes for other runners. The running clearly is part of the soldiers’ military practice and display, and the pharaoh ran only part of the way as a symbolic gesture. He did not join the race as a competitor. Moreover, this exceptional document, about a Nubian pharaoh running and giving prizes, comes from the twilight of pharaonic Egypt, not, like Homer in Greece, at the dawn of that civilization’s literature.

Egypt had popular sport activities, military physical training, and ritual royal performances, but Greece unquestionably had institutionalized athletic festivals with prizes and specialized facilities. The Sed run was Egypt’s oldest and most recurrent “race”, the “sporting pharaohs” of the eighteenth dynasty were a new development in reaction to the Hyksos’ invasion, and most depictions of sports concern the leisure activities, training, or ceremonial performances of officials or soldiers. Decker admits that Egypt had no

specialized facilities for contests. Despite abundant evidence for the use of chariots in hunting and war, he finds no evidence of chariot racing, and he concedes that the chariots themselves were not specialized for racing (1992, 46–55).

Egyptian civilization lasted for thousands of years, and Egypt's climate, wealth, and funerary customs left a great deal of evidence, yet even Decker finds only a few extraordinary or enigmatic instances that might be athletic. He reveals the cultural adaptation of sports in the distinctively Egyptian context, but he admits that the prominence of athletics in Greece was exceptional.

Egyptian hunting

Hunting animals for food had a long prehistory in the Middle East and Egypt. Some 6000 years ago, numerous “desert kites,” low but extensive wall formations made with stones in the deserts of Jordan, Israel, and Egypt, were traps for wild gazelles and other herd animals. The kites funneled beasts into enclosures, off cliffs, or into pits for slaughter (Holzer et al. 2010). Well-organized early hunter-gatherers clearly used topography and enclosures to their advantage.

Decker suggests that hunting in Egypt began as a way to provide food, but in time the leading hunter became a protector of early farming communities by dueling against beasts, and then, with civilization, hunting became a sport for the elite, a demonstration of superiority, and soon also a paramilitary preparation. Accordingly, swamp hunts (spearing fish and hunting fowl with throwing sticks) became a noble pastime after the Old Kingdom. Big-game hunting was the pharaoh's prerogative, and lions and bulls were reserved for the king into the New Kingdom (Decker 1992, 147–67; Houlihan 1996, 41–73). By hunting wild animals the king showed his ability to uphold the order and stability (*maat*) of Egypt civilization and to hold back the chaos of the animal world. Hippopotamus hunts were especially symbolic of the king's ability to prevent the destruction of fields. In royal art, hunts were analogous to battles, again demonstrating the king's power to maintain order in Egypt and the cosmos. Bull and lion hunts are intermingled with scenes of war on the temple of Ramses III at Medinet Habu, with inscriptions declaring that the king, as a great bull, punishes the people of Asia (Decker 1992, 153–7, figs. 117, 121–2).¹⁵

Pharaohs hunted game in the wild, but wild animals also were gathered for hunts or trapped and moved to special hunting parks, perhaps recalling the desert kites mentioned above. Artificially bounded by fences and ditches, the remains of a royal hunting preserve (600 × 300 m) of the era of Amenophis III have been found in Soleb in Nubia (Decker 1992, 153). In the New Kingdom, the introduction of the chariot led to its use in chasing animals in the wild, but

enclosures might still be used.

Hieroglyphic texts on the undersides of numerous large commemorative scarabs proclaim the hunting exploits of Amenophis III. Over 120 of these detail the number of lions he killed with arrows during his first ten years as king. Five others mention a wild bull hunt in the second year of his reign, when he was a young teenager. Hearing about wild bulls in the desert of the Fayum territory, the king set out to hunt them in his chariot with the whole army behind him. After having the bulls enclosed by a fence and a ditch, he then hunted for a few days and killed a total of 96 wild bulls. Note that the king was informed of the location of the bulls and that the army kept watch and enclosed the bulls with a ditch before the king began shooting them from his chariot.¹⁶ Accounts of prodigious kills, and claims that pharaohs drove their chariots themselves and hunted alone or nearly alone, probably are exaggerated.¹⁷ The king might be shown dispatching a magnificent beast but in practice numerous hunting attendants (e.g., beaters and guards) were nearby.

Royal Hunts as a Near Eastern Tradition

As hunting, sport, and warfare became analogous in early communities, in the Near East as in Egypt, good hunters became providers and protectors—warriors who pacified, expanded, or at least defended their territory. With the emergence of populous city-states, and especially with empires, the metaphor of the hunter-king was institutionalized in Mesopotamian art, legend, and ritual.

From the earliest times, lions, as fierce threatening predators, and bulls, with their great power and fertility, symbolized leadership. To confront, kill, or tame such beasts, to be a beast-master or bull-tamer, was the mark of a great leader. In the Sumerian epic, Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu killed great beasts (e.g., the giant Humbaba, the Bull of Heaven, and lions).

Mesopotamian kings and emperors appropriated such imagery to broadcast their virtues and strengths. Similarly, later Minoan, Hittite, and Mycenaean art utilized the symbolism of lions and bulls.

Since leaders were portrayed as divinely favored and superhuman, their hunting prowess and success in the Bronze Age Near East and Egypt had to be great, grand, and guaranteed. A failed royal hunt, a lack of game (and trophies), or problems with the killing would suggest personal weakness or an inability to control nature, so states arranged precautions and procedures to make hunting success more convenient and secure. Leaders set up and maintained well-stocked and well-staffed hunting parks—shooting galleries for ancient canned hunts. The carefully orchestrated spectacle of the royal hunt became an imperial institution.¹⁸

Later, in the same tradition, Assyrian royal hunts were staged for success and

spectatorship. Inscriptions and palace reliefs show kings performing in brutal self-glorifying hunts. Ninth-century reliefs from the palace of Ashurnasirpal II show the king hunting bulls and lions from a chariot. Ashurbanipal boasted c. 645 that he personally killed lions on foot with a lance or mace. He claimed to have killed beasts “nobly on the plain,” but he also had animals (including lions) brought to him in cages and then released for him to kill in front of spectators (see [Figure 1.3](#)). Reliefs from Ashurbanipal’s North Palace show him killing lions on foot and horseback, and shooting gazelles with a bow and arrow. One scene shows Ashurbanipal killing lions in an enclosure; he is encircled with soldiers, and assembled spectators from the royal court watch on nearby hills. Such scenes show calm strong kings killing magnificent beasts, especially lions, but note the assistants and the use of dogs, beaters, nets, and cages. Ending with libations over the victims laid out in rows, the hunt was staged around the New Year festival, and the 18 lions killed by the king represented the 18 accesses (gates, roads) to the city that he led and protected.¹⁹ Expanding upon early leadership displays, the reliefs and texts of hunts communicated imperial power to both natives and embassies. Like their boasts of brutality and heaps of bodies in wars, Assyrian kings’ descriptions of their hunting exploits present hunting as a royal and a religious duty.



Figure 1.3 Assyrian lion hunt scene from palace of Ashurbanipal at Ninevah, c. 645 BCE.

© The Trustees of the British Museum.

Persian kings later adopted the Assyrian hunting imagery of empire and royal protection, using stocked animal parks or “paradises.” Xenophon (*An.* 1.2.7) notes that Cyrus the Younger had a palace and a large hunting park (*paradeisos megas*) stocked with animals in Phrygia. Later, Alexander the Great and Hellenistic kings were great hunters along similar lines, and the

staged dispatching of collected wild animals in Roman arenas drew upon old Near Eastern traditions.

States and Sports, Empires and Spectacles

Neither monocausal in origin nor linear in diffusion, the genesis of sports and spectacles was a cumulative process of cultural adaptation. Performances became more structured with states and more spectacular with empires. Physical performances (e.g., hunting, dancing, running, processions, and combats) were elements of rites of passage, mating displays, festivals, and rituals of community—fields of play upon which status was defined and social orders were (re)constituted. Sports of various types allowed communities to incorporate physicality and aggression therapeutically. Also, as warfare became a feature of civilization, physical education, mock combats, and paramilitary displays of soldiers developed.

When expansive empires arose, power was centralized in capitals and in emperors who performed rituals of power. Superhuman emperors could not compete openly and equally; there could be no real suspense about the ultimate outcome of their performances. Their feats were ritualized to assure success (e.g., Shulgi's running, sporting pharaohs, and royal hunts). With so much at stake, in time, the stylized personal physical performances became largely theatrical illusions, and the monarch became the producer and honoree of processions and performances. He assembled performers and resources on such a scale and with such control that his power was beyond question. It no longer needed to be demonstrated personally and physically. Societies need sport, but empires need spectacle.

Through orchestrated performances, displays, and royal hunts, great kings and emperors symbolically controlled territories, peoples, and natural forces. Messages of their power were preserved in texts and monuments and transmitted by word of mouth, with awe and elaboration, over great distances. The expansiveness of empires created a need to amplify, publicize, orchestrate, monumentalize, and memorialize sport as spectacle, especially in empires with diverse peoples and tongues. Like standing armies, record keeping, the publication of law codes, and the erection of monuments in stone, early civilizations needed spectacles as rituals of power and social control, as political messages reaching well beyond the leader's local circumstances. The stories and images of strong men, hunters, warriors, and "athletes" were accepted as spectacular knowledge and sport history, and such traditions continued into the Late Bronze Age.

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Notes

- 1 Defining competition or rivalry as "striving to be superior to others in some respect" (i.e., either to gain something or to show superiority), van Wees (2011, 1) argues that competitiveness "... is a widespread human characteristic and has been the driving force behind many of the most dramatic developments in history from 10,000 BC onwards."
- 2 Meuli (1968, 15–67) sees the origin of Greek funeral games in the ritualistic identification of a man guilty of homicide; cf. Poliakoff (1987, 149–57). On initiations and funerals, see van Gennep (1950, 1–13, 164–5).
- 3 Spivey (2004, 1–29) argues (ix–xx) that "the imitation or enactment of violence" was an original purpose of Greek athletics. For cross-cultural studies, see Cornell and Allen (2002), or Radner (2011, 45–50), on competition among Assyrian warriors for "head trophies" of enemy leaders and for booty, eternal fame, and royal favor.
- 4 Trout (2011) suggests our continuing fascination with wild animals and beast tales stems from man's earliest fears of being chased and eaten by predators.
- 5 See Anderson (1985); Hughes (2007); Kalof (2007) for overviews.
- 6 Other essays in Fisher and van Wees (2011) show that competition for superiority was widespread in ancient societies and not limited to Greece, Rome, or Western Civilization.
- 7 Sjöberg (1985, 7–9) collects seals, sculptures, reliefs, and references to contests in the courtyard of the temple. See Eder (1994) on first millennium Mesopotamian cylinder seals depicting combats of wrestlers and boxers and other contests with daggers and swords. Also see Poliakoff

- (1987, 10, 18, 30–3) (on belt wrestling), 170, n. 10. Olivová's illustrated survey (1984, 21–39), includes a votive tablet of c. 2800 from Khafaje with two pairs of wrestlers and possibly a pair of boxers.
- 8 Tablet II, trans. Sjöberg (1985); cf. Rollinger (2006). Also see Poliakoff (1987, 134–40), who notes other wrestling motifs in ancient literature, e.g., Jacob in *Genesis* 32: 25–9.
- 9 Sjöberg (1985, 8–9). Rollinger (1994, 7–64) suggests late third millennium Sumer had wrestling, boxing, and footraces in festivals and possibly in funeral games.
- 10 On Assyrian footraces and wrestling matches, see Rollinger (1994, 46–53); Radner (2011, 37–8).
- 11 Kramer (1981, 284–8), *Hymn of Shulgi*, trans. Kramer, 286; Vermaak (1993); Lamont (1995).
- 12 Also see Olivová (1984, 40–61); Decker (2004, 2006); Poliakoff (1987), by events; Decker and Thuillier (2004, 9–61). Tyldesley (2007) gives a brief overview.
- 13 Decker (1992, 24–34), quotes 29, 32; Romano (1993, 10–12).
- 14 On Beni Hasan and Egyptian wrestling, see Poliakoff (1987, 25–7, 96), n. 60 on 179–80; on wrestling before the king 96, 108, fig. 10 on 27; on stick fighting 64–7.
- 15 Galon (1994) discusses scenes in Egyptian tombs of fights staged between bulls. The victor supposedly had the greatest procreative power and was used for mating. Similarly, the pharaoh was hailed symbolically as the “victorious bull.” Bull-leaping scenes also exist at Beni Hasan (tomb 29, south wall, left side).
- 16 Decker (1992, 150–2); Houlihan (1996, 71–2); Berman (1999), no. 226. Tuthmosis III reportedly killed 120 elephants for their tusks in one hunt; Decker (1992, 157–8).
- 17 For example, the Sphinx Stele of Tuthmosis IV claims the pharaoh hunted in the desert, shooting from his chariot, with only “a single companion”; Decker (1992, 51, 149, 154).
- 18 Allsen (2006), on royal hunts in the Middle East, India, Central Asia, and China from antiquity to the 1800s' provides a comparative perspective and striking similarities: for example, hunts symbolized territorial control, political power, and royal power over nature.
- 19 On royal hunts, see Anderson (1985, 6–10, 57–82), relief figs. 5, 20, 22a and b, 23–24. On lion hunts in palace reliefs, see Bersani and Dutoit (1985,

esp. 24–39).

2

Late Bronze Age Minoans, Hittites, and Mycenaeans

And since it was the custom in Crete for women to view the games, Ariadne was present, and was smitten with the appearance of Theseus, as well as filled with admiration for his athletic prowess

Plutarch, *Theseus* 19.3, Loeb trans. B. Perrin

Greek sport was not born full grown from the head of Zeus, like Athena in mythology, and it did not spend its infancy in a cultural vacuum. As with myth, art, and other elements of Greek culture, the shoots of Greek sport arguably sprang from fertile soil elsewhere in the Bronze Age Mediterranean world (c. 3000–1200). Egypt, the Near East, and Minoan Crete had several types of traditional activities and physical performances, and Hittite and Mycenaean traditions may have been somewhat similar. The Bronze Age Greeks, especially as they took to the sea, were exposed to and influenced by non-Greek sporting traditions. In the eclectic Mediterranean world, they readily adopted and adapted practices. Ultimately, Archaic Greece (c. 750–500 BCE) cultivated Greek sporting customs into an ethnically distinctive institutionalized system of athletic prize festivals (and physical education), which it exported back throughout the Mediterranean world by colonization and conquest (see Evjen 1986, 1992). Recent scholarship, however, doubts that the Mycenaean Greeks had funeral games, or much of a sporting repertoire beyond horse races and boxing. We now assume a period of discontinuity in sport after the collapse of Mycenaean civilization.

Minoan Performances: Rites, Contests, or Spectacles?

In the cultural sphere of Egypt and the Near East, and similarly structured with elite classes, priests, and palaces as administrative centers, the pre-Greek people of Bronze Age Crete and the Cycladic Islands developed cities and scripts centuries before the mainland Greeks. They had an intriguing array of sporting activities, especially in the Great Palace Age (c. 1650–1450), which may have been staged as initiatory performances by elite young Minoan males. Since they interacted with the Greek-speaking mainland Mycenaeans, who invaded and dominated them c. 1450–1400, Minoan influence on later Greek depictions of some sports seems possible. Plato (*Resp.* 452c) said the Greeks got athletic nudity from later (post-Minoan) Crete, and one tradition

traces the origin of the Olympics to the Cretan version of Herakles, but modern debate continues on such issues (see [Chapter 5](#)). Traditionalists (e.g., Gardiner 1930, 13–14) denied pre-Greek origins for athletics, but clues in literature and myth, and exciting if often enigmatic archaeological evidence, show that the Minoans knew some of the activities—if not in the same contexts and not with prizes—of later Greek athletics.¹

Centered on Crete and the great palace complex at Knossos but also found on nearby islands including Thera, the Minoans, at least the upper classes represented in art, were familiar with physical entertainments as leisure or cultic activities. The central courtyard at Knossos perhaps functioned as a performance area, and the miniature “Grandstand Fresco” of *c.* 1500 depicts numerous animated spectators, both male and female, watching some activity. A “theatral area” lies at the edge of the palace complex, and acrobats and dancers often appear on gemstones and in terracotta and bronze figurines. Echoes of such scenes perhaps later influenced Homer’s description of the Shield of Achilles (*Il.* 18.593–605), which says that Daidalos made a dancing floor at Knossos for King Minos’ daughter Ariadne. He describes a scene of intricate choral dancing with maidens wearing garlands and young men with knives hanging from sword belts, along with two acrobats and a host of delighted spectators. Dancing and acrobatics, however, as recreations, rites, or professional performances, were not new.

The boxer rhyton and runner’s ring

When Sir Arthur Evans discovered the palace complex at Knossos in 1899, he called the culture “Minoan” and viewed the people as serene and gentle; but a black steatite libation rhyton of *c.* 1550 from Hagia Triada (southwest of Knossos) bears scenes of organized violence. Four registers on the “Boxer Rhyton,” heavily restored from worn fragments, depict males with belts and codpieces, flowing hair, and typically Minoan physiques.² Some figures have some form of leg wrappings below the knee, and some can reasonably be identified as pairs with one figure defeating the other. The top register includes two men boxing each other, and a column separates them from three other men who appear to be boxers.

Minoan boxing is also depicted in a fresco of *c.* 1625 from Akrotiri on Thera showing two youthful figures with boxing gloves (on their right hands only), girdles, and blue caps with protruding locks of hair (see [Figure 2.1](#)). Scholars (e.g., Rutter 2014, 41) now generally agree that the figure on the left, with his impressive jewelry and skill, is dominant and socially superior. The context seems one of practice, not intense athletics with intent to injure. Perhaps the boxers were preparing for a later more vigorous match as part of an initiatory performance. While lacking the blood spurts of Greek vase paintings of boxers or Roman mosaics of gladiators, Minoan boxing scenes show that they too tolerated a high level of violence.

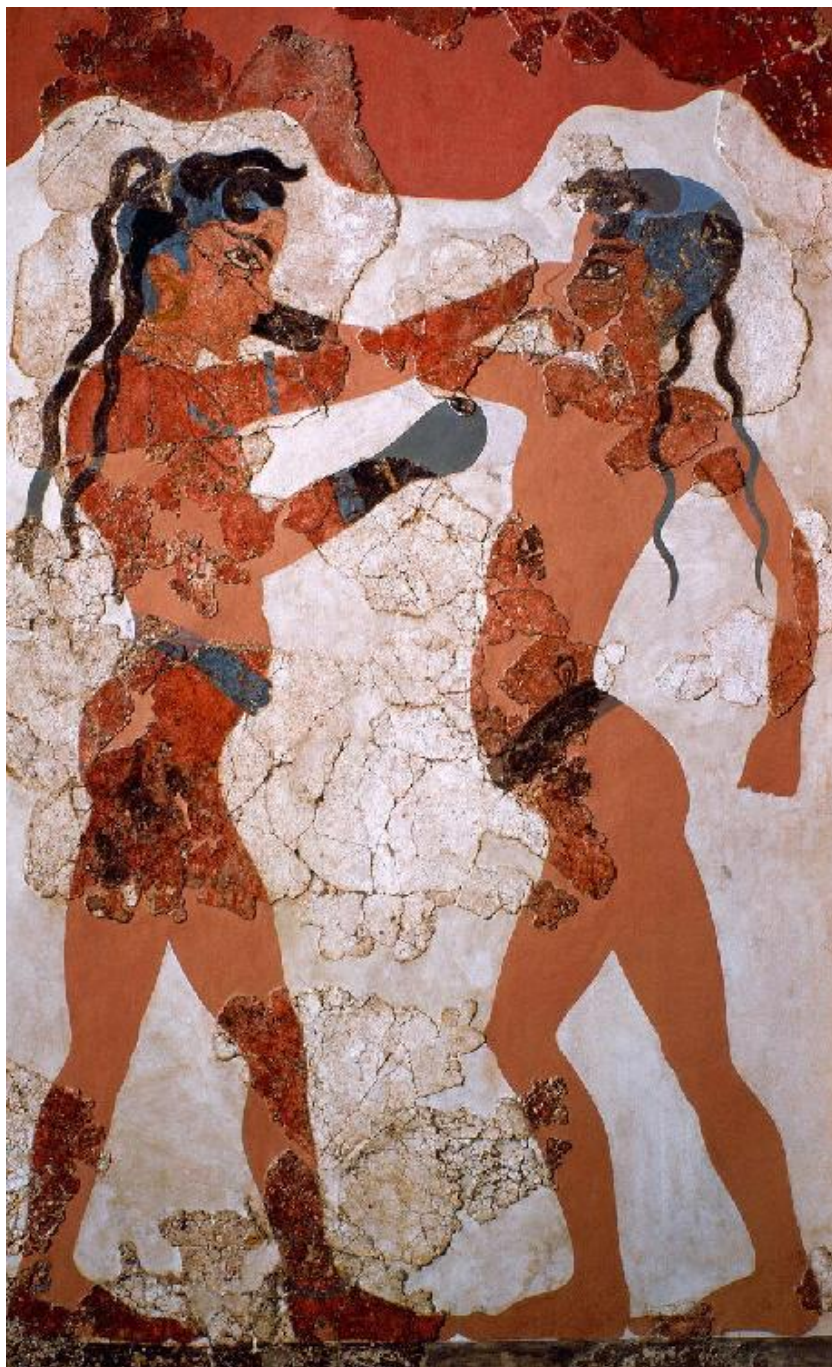


Figure 2.1 Minoan boy boxers, Akrotiri (Thera) c. 1550 BCE. Athens, National Archaeological Museum.

© Gianni Dagli Orti/Corbis.

The rhyton's second register depicts bull-leaping (see page 40), with one

leaper apparently being gored. In the third register, four helmeted men with forearm guards and padded hands, two upright and two on the ground, seem to be boxing. The fourth register has figures without helmets but with wrapped wrists. Two stand upright with their left arms raised in a defensive pose. Another figure, presumably a fallen opponent, is down on his backside, and the fourth has tumbled to his shoulders with his legs in the air. The pairs of boxers appear to be elite young Minoans, and the inclusion of distinctive Minoan columns with square capitals suggests a palatial context, so the scenes, if read sequentially, perhaps depict a program of initiatory performances.

Other indications of Minoan sporting activities include the “Runner’s Ring” of c. 1600–1525/1500 BCE, which seems to depict a male sprinting between a woman, possibly a priestess, and a man in a formal robe holding what may be a scepter.³ The figure runs on a flat surface or “track” suggested by two horizontal bands with small vertical lines (cf. the “field” on the bull-leap ring in [Figure 2.2](#)). The ring may be a dedication by a victorious runner (Lebessi et al. 2004), but the scene is unique, and the action may be a ritual. Other artifacts perhaps suggest running, as well as acrobatics, possibly as sacral or initiatory rites (Platon 2008, 98), but, while intriguing, such images are unusual finds. Bull-leaping scenes, however, are strikingly abundant, and since most bull-game evidence comes from or seems to refer to Knossos, Knossos probably was the center or even the only major location for such games.⁴



Figure 2.2 Minoan bull—leaping scene on a gold signet ring, c. 1550–1500.

© Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, UK/The Bridgeman Art Library.

Bull sports

Bulls were common ancient symbols of strength and fertility, often as consorts of goddesses. Wild bulls probably had to be hunted or captured in early times, and, as in Egypt, the ability to control or kill bulls was a sign of power and authority (Marinatos 1989). Neopalatial Knossos was bedecked with bull images in prominently placed frescoes (especially on formal entrance routes and in courts), including Evans' famous "toreador fresco," a restored panel of five original panels with bull scenes. By Evans' well-known traditional interpretation, the painting depicts a young male in a ruddy color and two young female assistants in white,⁵ all wearing belted breechcloths. The figures perform—or narrate the stages of—a bull-leap involving grabbing the bull's horns, vaulting gracefully onto and off its back, and landing. Related depictions suggest Minoans also wrestled or manually tried to dominate bulls by grasping them by the horns and turning their heads down.

Variations of scenes with humans confronting bulls are well attested in Minoan painting, and by pottery, seal-stones, and rings. A splendid depiction on a gold ring of c. 1550–1500 (see [Figure 2.2](#)) portrays a jumper in a posture similar to the central figure in the toreador fresco. That ring also has a horizontal double band, similar to the "Runner's Ring," to suggest a flat surface under the bull. Depictions continue from early examples c. 1900 to numerous examples c. 1600–1350, but they apparently end with the Mycenaean conquest. Evans (1930, 203–32) called such scenes "bull games" with "Minoan cowboys," but later scholars see deeper meanings in the Minoans' fascination with bulls.

The techniques and significance of bull-leaping remain actively debated (see Younger 1976, 1983, 1995). Methods apparently included the frontal leap over the horns, an elevated leap from above, a vault from the side, grappling with the horns, and more. Some scenes depict an unsuccessful figure lying prostrate on the ground under or near a bull. Questioning exactly how or whether such feats could actually be achieved (whether the Minoans used drugged, tame, or trained bulls, bulls with blunted horns, assistants, or helpful props such as leaping platforms) is misguided. The ancient bull-leap was performed, but examples of similar modern feats in Spain, Portugal, and France, or modern rodeo clowns doing similarly dangerous things, do not prove that the leaps were done exactly as moderns have reconstructed them. Be it bull sports, marathon runs, or gladiatorial training, the modern infatuation with experimental archaeology cannot fully remedy the limitations of our ancient evidence.

A better question is why bull sports were staged at all. Was this a religious ritual, an entertainment, a competition, a blood sport, a staged hunt, an initiatory rite, a political ritual of power, a stylized version of an original human sacrifice, or even an allegory for constellations in an astral calendar?⁶

Were the participants voluntary elite males, impetuous young men showing their courage, professional acrobatic performers at court, or captives or slaves enduring a dangerous ordeal?⁷

A leading authority, J. Younger (1995, 510–12, 521–3) sees bull activities (i.e., youths capturing a wild bull, then wrestling, leaping, and vaulting over it) as “bull-games” or “bull-sports” followed by the sacrifice of the animal, all in a formal festival context. He suggests that the events may have been an annual ceremony, held in the early spring, perhaps constituting a coming-of-age rite for aristocratic youths. The location of the events has been much debated. The central courtyards of Minoan palaces offer formality and facilities for control and spectatorship, but their paved surfaces may have been unsuitable. Some informal unpaved area with temporary structures, outside but in association with the palaces, may be more likely.

Theseus and Crete

Tales of the adventures of Theseus, collected later in Plutarch’s *Theseus* (and Apollod. *Bibl.* 209–13), mention Crete and games. Under obligation to King Minos of Crete for the death of his son Androgeos, Athens sent seven youths and seven maidens every nine years as tribute to Knossos. Plutarch (*Thes.* 15.2) says one version of the story suggests the victims were killed by the Minotaur in the Labyrinth, while another says they got lost and eventually perished in the Labyrinth, a location that evokes the asymmetrical agglutinative floor plan of the palace complex at Knossos. Plutarch (*Thes.* 16.2) adds that Philochorus (a local historian of Athens, c. 340–260 BCE) says that the victims were given as prizes in Minos’ funeral games for Androgeos.

After various exploits (e.g., capturing the Marathonian bull) Theseus volunteered and went to Crete. Assisted by Ariadne, Minos’ daughter, he navigated the Labyrinth and killed the Minotaur. Plutarch (19.2–3) again cites another version from Philochorus: during the funeral games, Minos let Theseus enter the wrestling contest against Taurus, Minos’ haughty general. Women could watch Minoan games, and Ariadne became enamored of Theseus’ looks and athletic skills. When Theseus won, Athens was freed of the tribute in youths.

Stories of Theseus as a bull/Taurus/Minotaur tamer/killer seem to recall Minoan bull sports, perhaps as an initiation rite or ordeal for youths. They also show that later Greeks had no trouble imagining Minoan athletic contests, Minoan female spectatorship, or the erotic allure of athletics. Greek attitudes to the Minoans reflect a certain ambivalence, a mixture of respect and resentment, admiration and animosity, not unlike the attitude of later Romans to the Etruscans. Both later civilizations borrowed from the earlier ones, but the Greeks and Romans seem to have wanted to distance themselves and

establish their own identities, often in ways relevant to sport and spectacle.

Bull games abroad

Though famously associated with Crete, and perhaps symbolizing the power of Knossos, images of bull sports were widespread in the Mediterranean basin from Greece to Egypt, Syria, and Anatolia (Morenz 2000). For example, the two gold cups (Athens Nat. Mus. 1758–1759) found in a Mycenaean tomb at Vaphio are decorated with bull themes and wasp-waisted Minoan figures. On one cup, a man ties a rope around the leg of a bull, with tethered cows on the other side of the cup. On the other cup, a bull is caught in a net tied between trees, and a bull charges with one man on its horns and another man falling below the animal. The scenes and probably the creation of the cups should be traced to Crete. Mycenaeans acquired such objects (e.g., seal-stones with Minoan scenes of acrobats and bull-leaping) by trading or raiding. More significantly, reconstructed fragments of the “Ramp House Fresco” of c. 1450 at Mycenae itself depict bulls and leapers, as well as an architectural facade with female spectators looking out a window (Younger 1995, cat. nos. 52, 82; Shaw 1996). Also, H. Schliemann, who excavated Mycenae in the 1870s, discovered a thirteenth-century bull-leap fresco at Tiryns (Younger 1995, cat. no. 97) and another one at Pylos (cat. no. 76). Most scholars see Mycenaean bull-leap images on walls and vases as borrowings of Minoan symbols, images associated with authority and enjoyed only by royalty, not as proof of bull-leaping at the mainland palaces (Rutter 2014, 43–4).

In an exciting discovery from the Egyptian site of ancient Avaris (Tell El Dab’a) in the northeastern Nile Delta come finds of fragments of miniature frescoes depicting bull-leaping and bull-wrestling (and perhaps bull-teasing), with leapers in different colors and with a geometric or maze-like pattern in the background.⁸ After active debate, a comprehensive study (Bietak et al. 2007) of thousands of fragments, originally from palaces, complete with digitally enhanced reconstructions of bull-leaping (esp. figs. 59a and b, 60), has clarified some issues. The frescoes are now dated to the eighteenth dynasty of the New Kingdom, c. the reign of Tuthmosis III, contemporaneous with representations of Minoans (“Keftiu”) in Egyptian tombs at Thebes c. 1500. Previously, it was uncertain whether the artists were Minoans or Minoanizing local artists (who emulated Minoan models using Minoan-style techniques but with some iconographical inconsistencies). Now, we learn that the fresco technique is non-Egyptian and the conventions (e.g., mazes, rosettes, and griffins) and style suggest that the several artists involved probably came from Knossos (or Thera) and replicated Cretan palatial frescoes.

M. Bietak (2007, 85–6) concludes that bull sports depicted at Avaris involved multiple bulls, acrobats, positions, techniques (e.g., leaping, handstands, hanging on, discussed 67–86), and different age groups from adolescents to

young men. Taller acrobats were bull-wrestlers; leapers were smaller. It is unlikely that bull games were actually performed at Avaris: "... bull leaping in the Minoan world may have been a prerogative of the Minoan palaces" (85). Also, the scenes at Avaris reflect Minoan and not Egyptian bull-games (86), and the context may involve a royal marriage to a Minoan princess or some high-level interstate meeting.

In the same study (2007, 115–32), N. Marinatos compares the bull-leaping scenes from Avaris with five panels of scenes from Knossos, and she also pays attention to Mesopotamian and Hittite evidence. The comparisons show that the Knossian figures depicted far more techniques than are found in Evans' reconstruction. Marinatos concludes, against Evans, that skin colors (yellow, reddish-brown, and white) reflected not gender but leapers of different status and roles in the performance (127–32). "The size, musculature and costume indicate that—contrary to established belief—the white figures in the Toreador panels represent *men*" (128).⁹ White figures seem to be larger and face the bull or hang on its horns, so the color suggests a level of danger. Reddish leapers, who do not face the bulls, seem to be smaller and younger. Given the tie of defeating bulls to royal ideology, the performers were all aristocrats (130).

Scholars now generally agree that Minoan bull-leaping or grappling performances were done only on Crete and that maze imagery seems to locate bull-leaping on palatial grounds near but outside of the palace. Performances probably were tied to elite initiation rituals, and the performers, even when painted in different colors, were all elite males (Koehl 2006, 335–7). Performances involved serious risks: accidents and injuries are depicted at Avaris and Knossos. In short, Knossian bull-leaping was prestigious, dangerous, and spectacular in the ancient world.

Imagery of the conquering of bulls was widespread. Earlier and from Syria comes a seal impression of c. 1750, from ancient Alalakh, near the Orontes, with a scene of two acrobats doing handstands on the back of a galloping bull. This and similar scenes on seals or sealings, along with the earlier Mesopotamian iconography of bulls and men confronting bulls, may suggest that Syrian bull-leaping practices predated those on Crete.¹⁰ Evans (1930, 205) had proposed an Anatolian origin for Minoan bull games, and a vase (of c. 1500) found in central Turkey at a Hittite cult center (Hüseyindede) bears a relief frieze of bull-leaping in a ceremony along with acrobats, dancers, and musicians. Bull games, with bulls sacred to or representing the Storm-god, seem to have been part of traditional Hittite religious ceremonies.¹¹

Egyptian, Syrian, and Hittite evidence, then, shows familiarity with acrobatic feats of bull-leaping in various regions, but debate continues about chronological primacy and interpretation. Some feel that peculiarities of artistic technique suggest local adaptations of imagery and raise doubts about any local practice of bull-leaping. We used to see bull-sports as especially or

entirely a Knossian phenomenon, but bull-games perhaps first came to—and not from—Crete.

In sum, Minoan performances included acrobatics, dancing, combat events, bull sports, and perhaps running, all best attested in the New Palace Age (1650–1459), especially at Knossos, in a palatial and spectator context. As indicated by their attire, jewelry, and hairstyles, the performers in bull and combat events were all male youths of elite status. The relationship of the activities to religious ceremonies, elite initiation, and political propaganda remains uncertain. Debate will continue but widespread evidence suggests interconnections among multifaceted bull symbolism and bull-leaping performances in the Bronze Age Mediterranean.

Hittite Contests?

While Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Crete had various performances and sporting activities (e.g., boxing, wrestling, running, and bull sports), forerunners of Greek athletic contests (and possibly prizes) perhaps existed among the Hittite peoples in Asia Minor. The early Hittites (Old Kingdom c. 1900–1400) were tribally organized under military leaders who felt compelled to demonstrate their physical prowess. Hittite art depicts vigorous leaders shooting arrows on foot and from horseback and hunting lions and boars from chariots. From their capital at Hattusas, the Hittites (Empire c. 1400–1200) expanded into the Levant, and they had contacts and conflicts with Egypt.

Known for worshipping numerous gods, the Hittites had an official calendar with as many as 165 festivals, all of which had to be performed properly at the correct time to retain the good will of the gods. The festivals, especially for the great Storm-god and Sun-goddess, required planning, resources, and numerous participants; and the involvement of the king, with his entourage and before assembled spectators, was crucial. Processions from the capital to rural holy places also involved ceremonies and entertainments. Reliefs from Alaca Höyük near Ankara depict the king and queen in procession, along with musicians, a sword swallower, and two men apparently performing acrobatic feats with ladders. Nearby scenes depict huntsmen with dogs killing wild game (e.g., lions, bulls, boars, and stags). Scholars agree that Hittite festivals had singing and dancing (perhaps as recreations of hunting) and a range of “sports contests” to entertain the gods, the king, and the crowd, but they disagree on the significance of the events (Puhvel 1988; Bryce 2002, 187–95).

J. Puhvel (1988) argues that the Hittites had funeral rituals with games and that at least six of the eight athletic events that Homer describes (see [Chapter 3](#)) in Patroklos’ games (running, archery, jousting, weightlifting or stone throwing, boxing, and wrestling) can be found in Hittite texts. Suggesting references to prizes for footraces and archery contests, he cites an account of a rite of spring, the Atashsum-festival in Hattusas (KUB X 18), in which the

king's bodyguards "... run (*pittianzi*), and he who wins, that one seizes the ass-bridle." The honorific title "he of the ass-bridle" was a royal military appointment. Puhvel takes this footrace by the royal entourage as the first-known reference to an athletic contest in cuneiform texts. Another text (KBo III 34, c. 1600 BCE) suggests an archery contest, again before the king, perhaps as a judge: "When they vie in shooting (*sieskanzi*) before the king, to him who scores a hit they give wine to drink."

The Hittites also staged mock battles, which Puhvel sees as analogous to Homer's combat in arms. The contest was between two teams of young men, one called the Men of Hatti (Hittites) and the other called the Men of Masa (in Western Asia Minor) (KUB XVII 35 III, 9–15). The Men of Hatti always won because they used bronze weapons against their opponents' reed weapons.

Puhvel also notes a fragmentary account of an athletic event (KBo XXIII 55 I, 2–27) concerning a military assembly in front of an idol of a solar god. In the first scene, an enemy falls down while "our" man stays up; when our man hits him the enemy's man goes down, "and all our troops applaud." Next, wild animals (two leopards and two bears) are brought in, and later bulls and black rams are sacrificed. Then wrestlers perform: "Ours and the enemy's man prostrate themselves to the deity three times, and then they proceed to wrestle When our man topples (his opponent), they applaud But afterwards the men likewise get into fisticuffs After that they go to *tarpa*. Four rams go to *tarpa*. Afterwards bulls go to *tarpa*." Puhvel suggests the beasts here were prizes, as in Homer, that there was an awards ceremony and celebration, and that *tarpa* may be etymologically related to the Greek *terpomai*, "to delight." The meaning of *tarpa* (prizes, bull sports, or sacrifices?), however, remains obscure (cf. Taracha 2002, 13–17).

Discussing some of the same texts but reaching different conclusions, C. Carter (1988) feels that Hittite athletic contests or feats, "... are mentioned only rarely in the festival texts. ... They were always a subordinate but integral part of the cultic activities." Carter shows that references are no later than the thirteenth century and that the interpretation of the terms for some events is debatable. He suggests that some form of fighting, some competition in weight or stone lifting by young men (in KBo II 8, Col. iii), and something like shot putting took place in religious ceremonies venerating (or entertaining) a god, after a ritual meal, and before the procession that took the god's statue back to his temple. Nevertheless, Carter concludes that athletic events did not have "a dominant or even a prominent place" in Hittite festivals.

Sport historians often cite a fourteenth-century Hittite manual or handbook for training chariot horses (some 1000 lines of cuneiform on four tablets), found at Hattusas but supposedly written by a Hurrian named Kikkuli. It details instructions for the diet and exercise of chariot horses, which were prepared on a training track over several months (184 days). Possibly the chariots were

raced, but probably they were being prepared for military purposes (Bryce 2002, 111–13).

Clearly, several later Greek athletic events were known to some extent in festivals in Anatolia in the second millennium, along with bull sports, acrobatics, and dancing. Mycenaean Greeks, probably known in Hittite archives as “Ahhiyawa” and possibly holding territory in coastal Anatolia, were in contact with the Hittites and other Anatolian peoples (e.g., see Gates 1995). Myths of Herakles and Pelops (see [Chapter 5](#)) have ties to both Olympia and Anatolia. The cultures were similar in their history, militaristic ethos, and activities (e.g., charioteering and hunting). Arguably, the Hittites influenced the Mycenaeans, but the case for institutionalized Hittite athletics, with voluntary open participation and prizes along Greek lines, remains inconclusive. Their activities seem to be associated with festivals rather than funerals, and the performers may have been temple personnel or soldiers. Like fixed combats before the pharaohs, the predictable outcome of some combats before the king suggests reassuring rituals or reenactments rather than unpredictable athletic contests.

Mycenaean Contests?

The earliest Greeks, the Bronze Age Mycenaeans, were militaristic Indo-Europeans who dominated mainland Greece by *c.* 1600, conquered Knossos *c.* 1450, and reached the zenith of their civilization *c.* 1450–1200. These vigorous people left behind ruins of citadels and burials with rich grave goods, both local and imported. They were in contact (by trade, conquest, mercenary service, or diplomacy) with Crete, Egypt, Anatolia, and the Levant. Traditionally, they have been regarded as especially agonistic and physical, as appropriate ancestors for later Greek athletes, but scholarship now doubts continuity in sport between Bronze Age Mycenaean and later Greek society.¹²

For investigating Mycenaean sport, Homer’s epics (*c.* 725–675 BCE) are a mixed blessing: a boon because the Mycenaean Greek Linear B tablets say little if anything about sport and because the physical evidence is fragmentary and unclear; a problem because Homer’s descriptions of sport, especially in the funeral games of Patroklos, incline readers to accept the bard’s attribution of a rich athletic life to the Greeks of the Trojan War era (*c.* 1225 BCE). Therefore, we need to look at the physical evidence for Mycenaean sport before discussing Homer to see if evidence independent of Homer allows us to accept Mycenaean chariot races and athletic contests (e.g., boxing, footraces, and spear throwing) as part of funeral games with valuable prizes.

Mycenaean burials, both the early shaft graves and the later monumental tholos tombs, suggest elaborate royal funerary rituals. Funeral games perhaps were held to appease the spirits or honor the memory of the dead with efforts and ordeals, or to redistribute prestige goods and reformulate the social

hierarchy, but we cannot simply assume their existence. Attempts to identify prizes in Mycenaean art have been futile because our images of early prizes come from later literature and art, not from any Mycenaean prizes themselves. The bronze tripods and cauldron prizes of Homeric athletics are post-Mycenaean.

Like Hittites and earlier Near Eastern peoples, Mycenaean saw hunting as a proof of manliness, a metaphor for warfare, and a demonstration of the king's power to rule. Their art, notably weapons (e.g., a sixteenth-century dagger with a lion hunt) from the shaft graves at Mycenae and other sites, abounds with images of virile hunters confronting lions and leopards, with spears and arrows, from chariots and on foot. A striking fresco (of the first half of the thirteenth century) of a boar hunt with dogs and spearmen from Tiryns is now in the Athens National Museum, and funerary stelai from sixteenth-century Grave Circle A at Mycenae bear reliefs of hunting scenes and chariots similar to Hittite scenes (Mylonas 1951).

Some images on Mycenaean pottery do seem to suggest chariot racing (Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, 126, 128, 221). A fragment of a twelfth-century amphora from Tiryns shows two chariots, apparently racing, on one side and a seated female or goddess on the other.¹³ Chariot races seem to be the only sport likely in postpalatial Mycenaean Greece (c. 1125–1050), and they are no longer seen as elements of funeral games, as in Homer. Rather, local lords (*basileis*) demonstrated their status through chariot racing and by social gatherings with drinking vessels decorated with scenes of competitions.

From outside the Peloponnese at Tanagra in Boeotia comes an unusual and tantalizing piece of evidence: a larnax or cinerary coffer for a child or youth from a chamber tomb of the first half of the thirteenth century. The rectangular chest bears painted panels on all sides.¹⁴ There are depictions of female mourners in procession and burial scenes on the end panels and depictions of female mourners on the upper zone of one side panel. Other zones on the side panels are highly suggestive, and Decker (1987) has seen them as events in Mycenaean funeral games. One scene includes two two-horse chariots, each with three riders, possibly in procession or racing but shown facing—not chasing—each other. Between the chariots two men face each other holding what may be swords, possibly indicating a combat in arms or a duel of some sort. M. Benzi (1999, 219–22), however, disagrees and suggests a boxing match. In either case, the riders in the chariots may be comrades or “seconds” for the combatants.

On the other side of the chest, the upper zone depicts a man with a sword dispatching a goat, surrounded by many other horned goats, possibly suggesting a sacrifice or hunt. The lower zone depicts three men, each leaping over the back of rampant bulls (Benzi 1999, 226–9). The activities depicted do not line up well with Homer's account of funeral games, and scholars (Benzi 1999; Rutter 2014, 46) see no strong evidence here for mainland

Mycenaeen funeral games.

Some large late Mycenaeen (thirteenth- and twelfth-century) kraters (vessels for mixing wine and water), exported by Mycenae and designed for a Cypriote market, display stylized scenes of boxing and running (e.g., boxers on a twelfth-century krater; Brit. Mus. Vases C334). An intriguing krater of c. 1350–1250 (see [Figure 2.3](#)) depicts two pairs of what may be belt wrestlers or perhaps boxers forced by some device (a leather strap?) to fight at close quarters. However interesting, this activity was drawn on a Mycenaeen krater for a Cypriote audience. Despite earlier suggestions,¹⁵ a small number of possibly athletic scenes (e.g., of runners) on Mycenaeen kraters and drinking vessels (see Vermeule and Karageorghis 1982, 93–4) do not adequately attest historical funeral games. Scholars are inclined to accept the depictions of boxers, but they do not interpret them as elite persons engaged in initiation rites as in Crete, but rather as lower class hirelings providing entertainment for elite social gatherings (Benzi 1999, 221–2; Rutter 2014, 45).

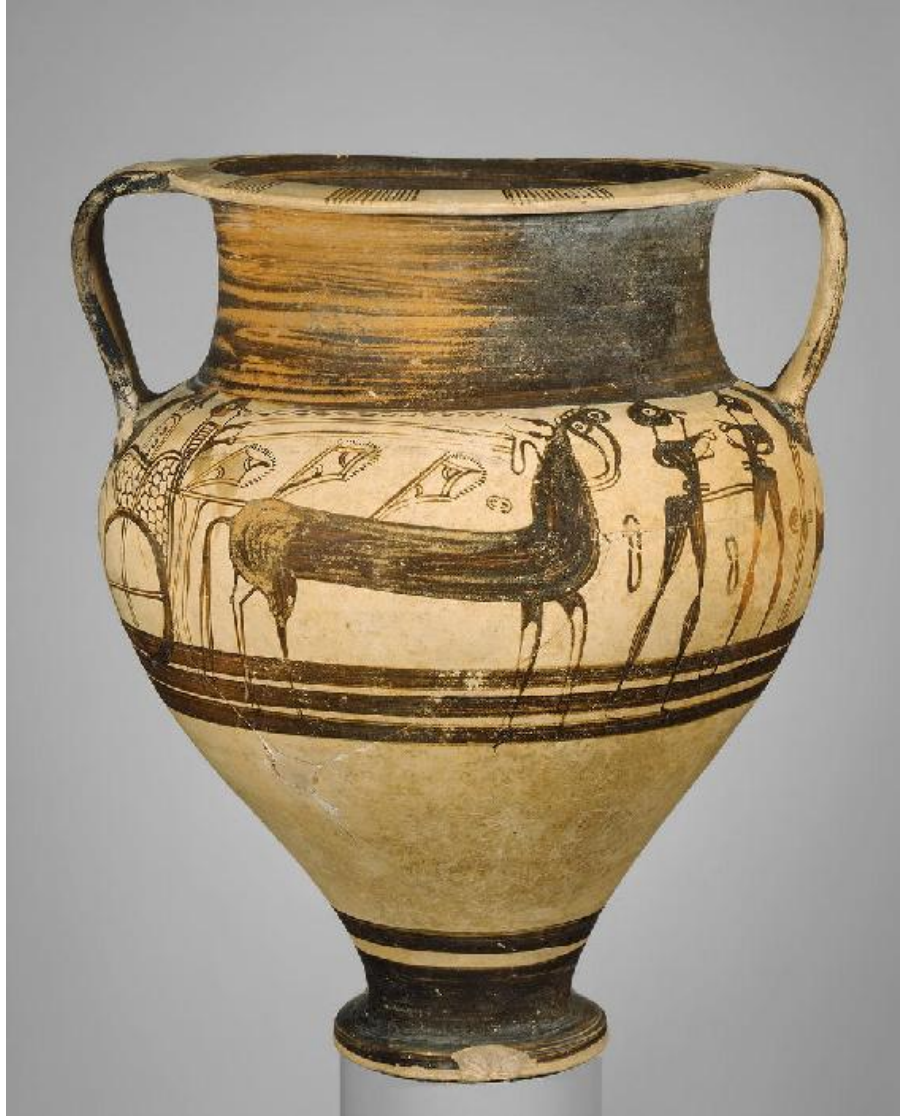


Figure 2.3 Mixing bowl (krater) depicting chariot and belt wrestling, Cypriote, Late Cypriote Period, c. 1350–1250 BCE. Ceramic. Height: 43.6 cm (17 3/16 in.); diameter: 35.5 cm (14 in.). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Henry Lillie Pierce Fund, 01.8044.

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The collapse of Mycenaean palaces in the early twelfth century brought an end to Mycenaean scenes of bull sports and boxing. Pictorial art, such as seals and frescoes, declined, and little more than vase painting continued. In a postpalatial age, humbler communities replaced the earlier system of palaces and kings. Local aristocrats at various sites probably retained enthusiasm for social gatherings, and for hunting and dancing, but chariot races probably

were the only formal competitions.

In summary, Bronze Age Greeks appropriated some aspects of Minoan culture, including frescoes, seals, and images of bulls and lions (e.g., the Lion Gate), but only at Mycenaean royal palaces. Mycenaeans retained their enthusiasm for personal physical performance in war and hunting, and that aggressive physicality aligns better with Hittite than with Minoan culture. The assumption of funeral games with various events, largely based on the larnax from Tanagra, now seems uncertain. Later Mycenaean leaders knew and probably practiced chariot racing, and depictions of boxers on kraters for export suggest possible boxing matches by lowly or servile performers in the context of royal entertainments rather than Homeric-style funeral games.

A Sporting Mediterranean World

Although the evidence invites multiple interpretations, Late Bronze Age Minoans, Hittites, and Mycenaeans all had versions of physical sporting performances. Whether they had athletics *per se* remains a matter of definition and criteria (e.g., voluntary, open, equal competition, and prizes), but sport and spectacle had a long Bronze Age history in lands around the Mediterranean. Trade and cultural interactions helped the transmission of cultures of sport and spectacle. No longer viewing the sports or spectacles of different Bronze Age peoples as compartmentalized, isolated, and unique phenomena, we now take broader multicultural perspectives.

Egypt and Mesopotamia had early and enduring spectacular performances in festivals and at court, including military exercises and staged feats of military and hunting prowess by kings, and Minoan Crete knew at least combat sports and bull sports. The Hittites had various sporting performances in festivals, possibly with prizes, and the Mycenaeans probably had chariot races and boxing performances. Since various combat sports had a long history outside Minoan Crete, and since chariot events are unattested for Minoan Crete, the Mycenaeans arguably borrowed heavily from Anatolia or the Near East. The Hittites and Mycenaeans combined Indo-European and Near Eastern elements in their civilizations, and the study of Hittite sport is an especially promising line of inquiry.

Recent scholarship shows links among these Late Bronze Age cultures, including religious ceremonies, at least paramilitary combat sports, hunting, and bull sports. Analogous to warfare, hunting, especially the great or royal hunts, involved orchestration in practice and embellishment in art. Debate continues on the techniques and meaning of bull sports. If practiced locally and not just adopted in art, they could differ from culture to culture, but the elements of animal power, violence, danger, and the necessity of human skill and fitness to avoid injury or death, were inherent in the activity. Like modern bullfights or rodeos, ancient bull sports were unquestionably spectacular.

The Late Bronze Age was a time of “Great Kings” and empires, with a widespread iconography and numerous rituals of power through which leaders demonstrated their virtues as hunters or warriors, claimed divine favor, and reinforced their authority (Feldman 2002). Parallels abound not because of any simple linear diffusion but because of multiple interactions and parallel sociopolitical needs for official performances. Empires were mediums for assimilation, and, except for mainland Greece (and possibly Crete), all the lands of the eastern Mediterranean had known early and recurring imperial rule. The imagery of the male leader as champion, athlete, or hunter, as someone worthy of obedience and reverence in politics and cult, is at least as old as Mediterranean civilization. That imagery of physical performance also pervades the mythology, legends, and epics of later Greece.

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Notes

- 1 See Renfrew (1988); Demakopoulou (1989); Miller (2004, 20–6).
- 2 Herakleion, Archaeological Museum, no. 409; Miller (2004, figs. 26–27); Koehl (2006, 164–6); see his reconstruction; Frontispiece, fig. 29, pl. 41.
- 3 Herakleion Archaeological Museum, HM 1699; Andreadaki-Vlazi et al., eds. (2008), vol. 1, cat. no. 161, fig. p. 204.
- 4 Hallager and Hallager (1995) suggest that Crete adapted bull iconography from Egypt and the Near East and that distinctive bull sport images, symbolizing royal power, were central to a palatial fresco program. They also argue that bull-leaping images on seals convey Knossos' bureaucratic authority before the Mycenaean conquest. Similarly, Marinatos (1994) feels bull-leaping scenes were part of an official Minoan iconography well known in contemporary Greece, Syria, and Egypt.
- 5 Indelicato (1988) and Marinatos (1989, 1994) challenged the white–red sex-color convention; see page 43 below.
- 6 Arnott (1993) suggests an initiatory parallel among the Oromo people of Southern Ethiopia with nude male youths jumping or running over the backs of bulls. Doubting that Minoans actually leaped bulls, MacGillivray (2000) sees the scenes as astronomical representations of constellations, and he reinterprets Evans' "horns of consecration" as the Egyptian symbol for the horizon. Rather than symbolism, Shapland (2013) recommends an approach from "Human-Animal Studies."
- 7 Koehl (1986) argues that Minoans had homoerotic initiation rites, including boxing and bull-leaping, with possible ties to Dorian Greek rites. Scanlon (1999) sees bull-leaping as both a contest and a ritualized religious performance for male and female youths, possibly with an initiatory function.
- 8 See Bietak (1992); Shaw (1995); Bietak and Marinatos (1995); Bietak (1996); Marinatos (1998).
- 9 German (2005, 18–32, 85–6) reads bull-leaping, especially on seals, as a gendering performance exclusively associated with palatial contexts and the identity of young elite males, while young females (and males) were

associated with dancing and processions. Potter (2012, 14–16, 364), n. 3, agrees with Marinatos and Palivou against Evans’ reconstruction of female leapers.

- 10 Collon (1994); Marinatos in Bietak et al. (2007, 130–2).
- 11 Taracha (2002); Sipahi (2001). Hittite texts apparently show that libations were poured to bulls, and some bulls were sacrificed. One text (*KBo* XXIII.55) refers to boxers and wrestlers in some festival along with some form of bull game.
- 12 See Rutter (2014, 43–8); Potter (2012, 14–18, 21–3).
- 13 Kilian (1980); Decker (1982–1983, 14–15); Evjen (1992, 99–100).
- 14 Thebes, Archaeological Museum 1; Tzachou-Alexandri (1989) no. 13.
- 15 Rystedt (1986) suggests runners and possibly spear throwers in Mycenaean vase painting, with two pairs of boxers and two runners on the same vase (figs. 9 and 10); Rystedt (1998) suggests possible depictions of *apobatai* (warriors descending from chariots). A possible boxing scene is found on a thirteenth-century seal impression from Pylos: Athens, National Museum 8476; Tzachou-Alexandri, ed. (1989) cat. no. 12.

3

Sport in Homer: Contests, Prizes, and Honor

Rise up, you who would endeavor this prize.

Homer, *Iliad* 23.753, trans. R. Lattimore

Homer's epic poems contain the earliest descriptions of athletic competitions in Western literature.¹ With elite competitors vying for multiple rich prizes, the main setting for sport in epic was funeral games, as in the contests Achilles organized for Patroklos in the 23rd book of the *Iliad*. Sport was an obvious and extended metaphor for war. Prowess with the javelin or spear in sport and war were analogous (*Il.* 16.590–1), and Achilles' pursuit of Hector around Troy is compared to a contest for a great prize at funeral games rather than modest games in a cultic festival (*Il.* 22.159–66).² Homer, however, also describes other types of games, including recreational, nonfuneral games in Phaiakia in *Odyssey* 8. Similes and images (e.g., a discus throw as a measure of distance, *Il.* 23.431) show that Homer's audience was familiar with athletic contests (e.g., assigning positions by lots, boxing thongs, and distance markers for throws) as elite pastimes. Achilles' idle men amuse themselves with discuses, javelins, and archery (*Il.* 2.774–5), and Penelope's noble suitors compete before Odysseus' palace at discus and javelin “on a measured field” for recreation (*Od.* 4.625–7, 17.167–9). However, we must appreciate that Homer's invaluable depictions of sport draw on oral traditions and weave together diverse elements (artifacts, customs, and ideas) from the past and present—often more thematic than historical—into his poetic tapestry.

Approaching Homer's poems as literary epics and as evidence for early Greek sport history, this chapter reviews the events and organization of games in the epics. It emphasizes the heroic ideology of competition, the spectator aspects (the interaction of spectators and the events as spectacle), and the role of prize giving in a society with traditions of gift exchange and guest friendship (*xenia*). It also notes how Homer uses the medium of games to assist his characterization of heroes and his demonstration of proper age relations and social etiquette and order. In *Iliad* 23, Achilles, having reentered the fighting after Patroklos' death in order to kill Hector, stages funeral games, and by his actions and words in the course of the contests, he is reintegrated into society, and he completes his reconciliation with Agamemnon. In Phaiakia in *Odyssey* 8 and in Ithaka in *Odyssey* 18 and 21, after years of sorrow and wandering, Odysseus recovers and proclaims his identity; he then returns and reclaims his home and wife by demonstrating his physical prowess.³

Homer and His World

Assessing the value of Homer's accounts of games as historical evidence involves tackling the "Homeric question." Whether seen as one bard's composition or several writers' compilation, Homer's profession, patrons, and medium as an epic poet mandated that he applaud the heroic deeds of a greater age of men.

As noted in [Chapter 2](#), sport and spectacle in the Aegean Bronze Age were centered on palaces and royal contexts. Widespread disruption in the late second millennium ended palace-centered systems, their iconography of bulls, and institutionalized performances by and before royals in Crete, Anatolia, and Greece. The formulaic construction and the oral transmission of the tales allowed Homer to mention Bronze Age artifacts and places, but the reduced economic circumstances of postpalatial Early Iron Age Greece (c. 1100–750) were quite different from the splendor and power of high Bronze Age Mycenaean kingdoms.

In postpalatial twelfth-century Mycenaean society, warrior aristocrats probably displayed status through group chariot racing and social gatherings at various local centers, but, with the absence of writing, for the early stage (1100–900) of the Early Iron Age, or what has been called the "Dark Age," evidence for Greek sport is meager indeed.

In time, the emergence of Geometric vase painting (c. 900–750) brought images of chariot races and boxers.⁴ Such scenes reflect not continuing Bronze Age customs but rather contemporary funeral games held by local warrior aristocrats to honor the distinguished dead and their achievements and also to display the status and heritage of the aristocrats themselves.

Homer's two great epics took their essentially final or canonical forms c. 725–675 as the Early Iron Age overlapped with the Archaic. Despite the dramatic Trojan War setting in the Late Bronze Age (c. 1225), Homer's testimony on athletics in general suggests not accurately remembered Bronze Age Mycenaean reality but Greek customs and developments of roughly the ninth- to eighth-century "world" (or even later times).⁵ Homer and his audience were familiar with two types of games and prizes—those associated with earlier great funerals and those in religious festivals (with sacrifices, footraces, and lesser prizes) from Homer's contemporary world. In Homer's world, however, sport and society were changing.

While looking back to the distant past, the bard constructed his world to please his contemporary eighth-century patrons, and the "mind" of the epics—the values and emotions of the characters—is the mind of Homer's listeners. By task and tradition, he upholds an agonistic heroic ethos, a moral order stressing honor and piety and a hierarchical social order based on elite display and nonelite deference. His patrons wanted to be reassured that they

were scions of a tradition of excellence, even as their aristocratic world was being undermined. Like Pindar later, Homer earned rewards for his art from those who could afford to hire him. For their part, common Greeks, who could not afford the singer but came to know the songs, absorbed a similar enthusiasm for—and ideology of—games.

Homer was attentive to his elite patrons, catering to their interests by immortalizing war and sport in his epics, but tensions and inconsistencies in the poems reflect contemporary socioeconomic changes. Although Homer still depicts games without the facilities, calendric coordination, crowns, or nudity of athletics in Archaic Greece (c. 750–500 BCE) (see [Chapter 4](#)), his games reveal a period of transition and tension from aristocratic supremacy and display (e.g., horses and funeral games) to the emergence of the city-state (*polis*), changes in the methods and participants of warfare, increased trade and commerce, marketable nonmilitary skills, moveable wealth, and meritocratic competition in athletic festivals.

Values and Competition

Homer's epics endorse a warrior's heroic or aristocratic code, an ideology of competitiveness, male virtue, and Greek ethnicity that dictated the values and etiquette of early Greek sport. As noted in [Chapter 1](#), their fathers told Glaukos and Achilles "Always to be best and to be eminent beyond others (*Il.* 6.208 and 11.784)." To be recognized as a good man, an *agathos*, a man of worth, one had to possess and demonstrate *arete* or special skill or excellence, most effectively in war but also in other areas such as hunting and sport. Common (free) men were to be treated well, provided they knew their place and showed proper respect for people of higher status. Leaders were expected to be competitive, involved individuals rather than passive spectators. Aggression in war and competition in games externalized and embodied excellence, confirmed status, and brought honor. Rebuking Paris for cowardly shirking battle (*Il.* 6.521–5), Hector faces certain death at Achilles' hand rather than feel shame before the Trojans (*Il.* 6.442–6). Like some ancient (and modern) athletes, Achilles preferred a short glorious life to a long inglorious one.

More inclined to hubris than humility, Homeric heroes usually are eager to trumpet their talents and courage, especially in battle but also in situations of both direct competition and noncompetition in sport. In funeral or social games, heroes are invited and expected to compete. Boasts and challenges claim that individuals had won, could win, or will win different events, but in some instances heroes decline or evade invitations or challenges to compete. They abstain or are excused from competition, becoming spectators (for the moment at least). Not to compete or fight—not to accept an invitation to show one's excellence—was unusual and possibly tantamount to renouncing one's claim to status. Noncompetition demanded explanation and justification.

Prizes and Spectatorship

Homeric sport was not sport for its own sake. Contests were opportunities for status definition and display, and the awarding and winning of prizes confirmed the status of both victor and host or games organizer.⁶ Prizes in the games for Patroklos were valuable objects with symbolic messages, such as the plundered armor of a defeated foe. Multiple prizes—something for each entrant in most events—affirmed Achilles' generosity and his desire for improved relations with his fellows; and they also avoided the shame of absolute, empty-handed defeat for most of the heroes. Almost all the competitors gained materially in the games, thus confirming their social superiority above non-warriors and nonathletes. In the *Odyssey*, the contexts and prizes, while different, remain crucial to Odysseus' identity and status. Homer's contests and their prizes reveal a society rooted in aristocratic funeral games but adjusting to the emergence of nonfuneral, social, and sacred games.

Heroic excellence was largely externalized in physical and forceful action displayed, witnessed, and affirmed in public by an audience. In wars, contests, or assemblies, gatherings of people provided an opportunity, an audience, for displays. Neither apathetic nor silent, Homer's spectators in *Iliad* 23 applaud the suggestion of awarding second prize in the chariot race to Eumelos, they are silenced by the boxer Epeios' threats, they laugh or applaud at slips and poor performances, they gasp in fear and halt the combat at arms, and they gaze in wonder at the dying bird in the archery contest. Spectatorship existed on both the human and divine plane, and rivalry among the gods even led to interference. Losers feel that they cannot overcome divine influences on the outcome of events (*Il.* 23.405–6, 782–3, 787–8). Athena plays a recurrent role, helping Diomedes in the chariot race and Odysseus in the footrace in the *Iliad* and assisting and acclaiming Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. Nevertheless, these were not sacred games; they were as secular as things could be in Homer's world.

Funeral Games for Patroklos: Prizes and Reconciliation

The normal but not the only occasion for Homeric athletics was the funeral of a great man, when a games organizer (*agonothetes*) or prize giver (*athlothetes*) sets up *ad hoc* prizes to initiate contests, as in the games for Patroklos (23.257–897). The number and value of the prizes represented the respect afforded the memory of the dead hero, as in Thetis' lavish prizes in funeral games for her son Achilles (*Od.* 24.85–94). Games and prizes were customary but not mandatory; it depended on the status of the deceased and

the generosity of the organizer. In *Iliad* 23, “the people” were turning to leave, perhaps not expecting games because Patroklos was a lesser warrior, when Achilles made them stay and sit in a wide assembly (*agon*, 23.257–8). Funeral games required spectators, competitors, and prizes.

As patron and arbiter, Achilles introduces the games simply by setting out prizes. There are no sacred oaths, processions, or elaborate preparations of facilities. The prizes and the spectators turn the location, near a pyre and a place of sacrifice, into a site of games. Diverse prestige goods become valuable prizes: “cauldrons and tripods, and horses and mules and the powerful high heads of cattle and fair-girdled women and grey iron” (23.259–61, trans. R. Lattimore). Analogous to war booty, Achilles’ prizes are trophies, symbols of victory over an opponent.

Homer’s announcement and awarding of athletic prizes derive from gift-giving rituals. Prizes allow the peaceful redistribution of a dead man’s prestige goods or the formation, renewal, or repair of social ties. Some of the prizes came from the property of Patroklos, but Achilles also distributes a great deal of his own plunder from his ships. Achilles’ grief is real. He wants to honor Patroklos, but he also needs to make amends with the Greek princes. Achilles’ prizes make as much sense as gifts as they do as prizes.

Dramatically, the games are an elaborate device whereby Achilles can give gifts of reconciliation or recompense (*apoina*) to the Achaean leadership from whom he had alienated himself, notably by insulting and threatening Agamemnon for his unfair distribution of gifts in Book One, and later also by his refusing Agamemnon’s gifts of reconciliation (including “prize-winning horses,” 9.123–7, 265–9) in Book Nine.⁷ A far cry from Olympia’s emphasis on single, first-place victors, most competitors get prize-gifts. Nestor even gets a gift without entering, and Agamemnon gets a prize for entering without actually competing.

In some of his invitations to competitors (23.753, 707, 831; cf. 23.659, 802), Achilles says: “Come ye who would contend for this prize.” Seemingly any and all are invited to compete, but Homer’s aristocrats do not embrace the democratization of sport. Here, social exclusivism and deference keep out just anyone. In Homer, physical and moral excellence go together, so lowly men like Thersites, the physically inferior, ugly, and obstreperous commoner thrashed by Odysseus earlier (*Il.* 2.212–9, 244–77), do not enter games. All competitors (except Epeios, see below) are “princes.”

Achilles shows his intentions by beginning with an invitation emphasizing Agamemnon and the other nobles (23.272): “Son of Atreus and all you other strong-greaved Achaians. These prizes are in the place of games and wait for the horsemen.” Achilles’ prize giving goes on and on until Agamemnon stands for the javelin and Achilles ceremoniously but quickly gives him a gift-prize in recognition of his excellence (23.890–4).

Contests, winners, and losers

The first event, the chariot race has the longest account (23.287–650), the greatest prizes (a skilled woman and a large tripod, a pregnant mare, a new cauldron, two talents (a large weight) of gold, and an unfired bowl), and the most competitors (Eumelos, Diomedes, Menelaos, Meriones, and Antilochos). Agamemnon avoids Achilles' direct invitation but remains an involved spectator by lending his brother Menelaos his spirited mare (23.295). This two-horse (not Olympic four-horse; see [Figure 3.1](#)) chariot race suits both the Mycenaean setting and Homer's aristocratic eighth-century patrons.



Figure 3.1 Depiction of funeral games of Patroklos on fragment of an Athenian black-figure dinos (mixing bowl) by Sophilos, 580–570 BCE. Athens, National Archaeological Museum. A 1549.

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After announcing the race as the donor, Achilles shows that he was accustomed to the role of recipient (23.274–5, R. Lattimore): “Now if we Achaians were contending for the sake of some other hero, I myself should take away the first prize to my shelter.” Being excused from competition by his role as host is not enough for Achilles. He explains that he and his horses will stay on the sidelines, grieving at heart for Patroklos, but he claims that he could win under different circumstances. Emotion and etiquette make Achilles

a noncompetitor but he still demands status recognition. No one disputes his claim.

As a conscientious games organizer, Achilles had apportioned starting positions by lot and stationed Phoenix as a judge at the turn-post (a stump) to watch the race and report back (23.352–61), presumably if he saw foul play. Achilles, however, could not control the gods, who watch closely. Descending to help the frontrunner Diomedes, Athena retrieves his whip after Apollo made him lose it, and she then breaks the chariot yoke of Diomedes' challenger Eumelos (23.389–92). She goes on to inspire Diomedes and his horses to win (23.400). With the gods playing favorites and fouling charioteers, must the humans act like perfect sportsmen? Raising issues about fair play and obsession with success, youthful Antilochos nearly causes an accident by driving dangerously and refusing to yield to Menelaos, an elder with more authority, at a narrow point (23.415–41; O'Neal 1980; cf. Dickie 1984a).

Shifting focus to the spectators sitting "in assembly" at the finish line (23.448–98), Homer reinforces the motif of tension between younger and older men. Idomeneus, an elder prince of Crete, and young, aggressive Aias (Ajax), son of Oileus, bicker about which chariot is in the lead. Idomeneus is interested in the position of Eumelos, his fellow Cretan, who had been leading earlier. After Idomeneus suggests that someone else is now in front, Aias argues with and offends his senior, Idomeneus, who insults him in return. Idomeneus then challenges the younger warrior to a wager (of a tripod-cauldron), not about the winner but about which chariot is in the lead (thus in effect about whose eyesight is better), with Agamemnon to be a witness to the positions of the chariots. Homer's scene of excited, contentious spectators lets Achilles come forward not as the hot-headed warrior of Book One but as a conciliator who stems the escalation of insults (23.493) and restores order.⁸

At the end of the race, Eumelos drags his broken chariot in last. Achilles pities him (23.533) and generously offers him second prize because he lost due to factors beyond his control. The spectators applaud the idea, but Antilochos objects. Reminding Achilles of Patroklos and of his own inappropriate behavior and aggressiveness about his prize (Briseis) in Book One, Antilochos refuses to surrender second prize (23.541–54).⁹ He says that Eumelos should have prayed to the gods and that Achilles should provide an extra prize. Instead of inflaming the situation, Achilles smiles (23.556) disarmingly, relieving the tension. Wanting redemption through generosity and conflict resolution, Achilles provides an additional prize, a breastplate, for Eumelos.

Despite Achilles' gesture, the older Menelaos and the younger Antilochos nearly come to blows over their placements and prizes (23.566–95). Accusing Antilochos of foul play, Menelaos demands that he take an oath that he did nothing wrong in the race. When Antilochos apologizes, blames his

misbehavior on his youth, and offers Menelaos the mare, Menelaos lets him keep the mare, and he takes the third prize, a cauldron, for himself. The incident teaches Antilochos, a surrogate Achilles, to show courtesy to his elders and social superiors, to accept his place in the social order, and he is rewarded for it.

Having shown himself as a conciliator and a generous host, Achilles next demonstrates respect for the aged. He magnanimously gives a prize (a two-handled jar, leftover because he gave Eumelos an extra prize) to Nestor in memory of Patroklos. Nestor will never compete in athletics again because the “hardship of old age” is upon him (23.620–3). Although old age justifies noncompetition, Nestor is not content simply to be excused. From an agonistic family (his father Neleus sent a chariot team to race in Elis, *Il.* 11.698–702), he elaborates on his former *arete* (23.627–45). Claiming excellence by recalling his several wins in the funeral games for Amarynkeus, he declares that there was no man like him then, that he once was conspicuous among heroes. He is pleased that Achilles remembers him and grants him his due respect (23.647–9).

As a noncompetitor, Nestor is the inverse of Achilles: his spirit is willing but his flesh is weak. Too old to compete personally, he competes vicariously through his son Antilochos, and his excellence now, in sport and war, is as an advisor. Before the chariot race began, he had recommended tactics to Antilochos: his team is not the fastest, so Antilochos must try to win by skill or cleverness (*metis*, 23.306–21), and he must be especially careful at the turn (23.334–43; Dunkle 1987; Roisman 1988). Nestor and Achilles, as noncompetitors, assume the roles of advisor and arbiter in the games but they expect and receive recognition.

The announcement of the second event, the “grievous” boxing (23.651–700), with a mule and a cup as prizes, brings forth the first appearance of a boxer named Epeios. Not an aristocrat, and later the builder of the Trojan Horse (*Od.* 8.493, 11.523), Epeios appears in two events, namely the boxing and the weight throw, but only in Book 23 (Howland 1954–1955). The boxing match is his showplace. He boasts threateningly about his prowess in boxing but then he apologetically admits his lack of military excellence, remarking that no man can excel at everything (23.669–71). This passage may anticipate later criticism of the military value of athletics, but Epeios’ lack of military skill makes his boxing even more precious to him.

Epeios’ boast that he could harm any opponent seems intended to dissuade and intimidate others, but such bravado is also part of a boxer’s psychological preparation, in effect convincing himself that he will win. The initial reluctance of opponents to step forward may stem from his obvious prowess or the princes’ disinclination to risk losing to a non-noble. Diomedes is an aggressive warrior but he does not accept Epeios’ challenge. Only Euryalos, who comes from a boxing family (his father defeated all opponents in boxing

at funeral games for Oedipus in Thebes (23.677–80)), dares to face Epeios. Diomedes, Euryalos' relative, acts only as his second. Some Homeric competitors enter multiple events (Telamonian Aias attempts three), but excellence (by birthright or training) in specific events apparently was expected of those who joined in the games.

Before starting, the boxers gird themselves with loincloths (*zomata*) about their waists and wrap their hands with ox-hide thongs (*himantes*, 23.683–5). This accords with the non-nudity and the wrapped hands of boxers in earlier cultures; distinctively Greek athletic nudity lies ahead. The actual description of the fight is short (less than 10 lines) but brutal. Epeios knocks Euryalos out but immediately helps him stand up, and Euryalos' companions assist his departure as he spits blood and his head wobbles (23.694–7). They take with them the two-handed goblet the loser had earned for his courage. Epeios' magnanimity to his fallen opponent perhaps was good sportsmanship, or perhaps it was a tactful gesture of deference to his social superior, and a wise move after dispatching Euryalos in front of Diomedes and other warriors. Epeios was allowed to compete, but he stayed mindful of his social status, at least for a while.

Next, in a classic contest of skill against strength, Odysseus and Telamonian Aias girt themselves and wrestle (23.700–39). After trying to throw each other and getting nowhere, each one tries to pick the other up, rather like belt wrestlers. Odysseus wins the first fall by tripping Aias, but they fall together the next time. Achilles steps in to end the combat prematurely, feigning concern that the wrestlers might get hurt or exhaust themselves (23.735). More interested in distributing prizes than determining a clear first-place victor, he proclaims that both wrestlers have won and should "take the prizes in equal distribution," which is impossible because the first prize is a tripod worth 12 oxen and the second prize was a skilled woman worth four oxen. By stopping the event prematurely, Achilles lets both wrestlers gain materially and avoid losing, and he can move on to more events and more prize giving.

In the footrace (23.740–97), for a silver bowl, an ox, and half a talent of gold, the themes of age and courtesy recur. As younger men, Antilochos or Aias, son of Oileus, should win, but Odysseus prays to Athena for assistance. She enhances his running and also trips up Aias, who falls and gets a mouthful of filth. Aias complains that he was fouled by divine interference, but the brash warrior gets no sympathy from the spectators, who are not above laughing at an unpopular loser. Antilochos, respectfully conceding defeat, says that the gods favor older men and that no one could keep up with Odysseus, "except for Achilles" (23.792). Thus, Achilles, earlier as a charioteer and now as a runner, is the uncontending but acknowledged champion. For his compliment, Achilles gives the now well-mannered Antilochos an additional half-talent of gold, doubling his prize for third place. Once again, Achilles' motives involve the symbolic economics of gift giving, not just the athletic determination of

single winners and multiple losers.

The contest in arms (23.748–825) seems both appropriate and inappropriate. The objective is to fight to the point of bloodshed, until one warrior strikes a blow through his opponent's armor and draws dark blood from his torso. The spilling of (some) blood was dangerous but not out of place in games among warriors honoring a dead warrior, on whose pyre Achilles had sacrificed 12 Trojan captives.

Such an obviously militaristic combat with bronze spears for "the best among you" (23.803) might reasonably have tempted Agamemnon, "best of spearmen," but it is Diomedes and Aias, son of Telamon, who fight. Achilles says the victor will get a precious silver-studded sword, but both fighters will share a set of armor (a spear, shield, and helmet). He adds (23.810) that he also will host the combatants to a dinner. This dinner is an additional honorific prize, one reminiscent of the stele of Taharqa and looking forward to prizes of food and meat in later Greece.

The combat becomes mortally dangerous when Diomedes loses his temper. At first the crowd is held in wonder, but when Diomedes' spear thrust through Aias' shield does not penetrate his breastplate, and Diomedes stabs over the shield at Aias' neck, the spectators fear for Aias' safety. They call out for Achilles, who had been responsible directly and indirectly for the deaths of many warriors at Troy, to stop the fight and divide the prizes evenly. Achilles properly concedes and stops the fight, saving Aias from serious injury or death (23.823). Achilles gives the sword to Diomedes, perhaps as the dominant fighter, or to remind the crowd who controls the giving of prizes.

Next, in the weight throw (23.826–49), a lump of pig iron (*solos*) is both the equipment and the only prize. The iron was the "throwing-weight" (23.826–7) of Andromache's father Eëtion, a man of great strength, whom Achilles had killed earlier. Achilles declares that the iron would be useful for a country estate, supplying the needs of shepherds and ploughmen for five years, so they would not have to go to the city for iron. Aside from the anachronism of a heavy lump of iron in this Bronze Age setting, the event is unusual in that there is only one victor and one prize. The single prize and the iron itself probably come from Homer's contemporary world.

Perhaps deluded by his boxing success and forgetting his status, Epeios embarrasses himself by entering the contest and throwing first. The event is so obviously beyond his expertise that his attempt makes the spectators laugh (23.840). In Homer, the discus is a pastime of nobles, and Epeios' failure and humiliation put him in his place. Next, Leonteus surpasses Epeios only to be surpassed by Telemonian Aias, who throws beyond the marks (*semata*, 23.843) of the others, only to lose again when Polypoites throws well beyond the other three. The crowd applauds, and Polypoites' companions carry off the iron prize.

Achilles next brings out “gloomy iron” again in the form of 10 double-bladed axes and 10 single-bladed axes as prizes for the archery contest (23.850–83). The objective was to hit a live pigeon tethered to a pole; missing the bird but hitting the string brought the lesser prize. Teukros and Meriones enter the contest and draw lots. Shooting first was an advantage, for hitting the pigeon first would end the contest. Teukros shoots first, but he failed to pray to Apollo, god of archery, and his arrow hits the string and cuts the bird loose. Meriones acts quickly, vowing a hecatomb of lambs to Apollo, and miraculously he hits the bird flying high in the sky. Homer describes the innocent bird’s death agony at length, and also the attentiveness and wonderment of the spectators. Whatever this event lacked as a sporting contest, it made up for as a violent spectacle. It recalls earlier associations of hunting prowess with status and the propriety of appealing to gods for help in contests; and it has obvious allusions (e.g., axe handles, archery, and killing trapped prey) to Odysseus’ later killing of the suitors in Ithaka.

The last event is the spear throw (23.884–95) with a spear and a cauldron worth an ox as prizes. Achilles makes no announcement, but the spear prize serves to proclaim the contest and to invite Agamemnon. When Agamemnon and Meriones enter, Achilles abruptly stops the contest. Eager to give a prize to Agamemnon without any uncertainty about the outcome, Achilles declares the event would be “no contest.” Meriones does not protest. Acclaiming Agamemnon as by far the greatest of spear-throwers, Achilles recognizes his elder’s supreme power and awards him the cauldron (23.891–3). Achilles next invites Agamemnon, “if his heart is willing,” to give the spear to Meriones, and Agamemnon agrees. The two men who began a disastrous feud over a prize in Book One now publicly cooperate in giving and sharing prizes.

Agamemnon’s entry into the games at this late point, after Achilles had made repeated invitations, expended great wealth, and acted as a conciliatory games director, was a gesture of reconciliation. Achilles had shown generosity, courtesy, deference, and concern for others, and Agamemnon had made him pay dearly for his previous disrespect. When Achilles acknowledges that Agamemnon is illustrious (23.890–1), and Agamemnon accepts a prize, the games, as a means of reconciliation, can and do end.

The *Odyssey*: Sport and Returning Home

The *Iliad* is an intense tale of rage and battle, but the *Odyssey* is an episodic romantic tale of wonders and wandering as Odysseus slowly retrieves his identity and returns home. We move from funeral games, with analogies to war, to sport in social settings (involving guests, suitors, or strangers), but the same agonistic ethic applies. Sport remains a means of characterization and a way to show social status and prove personal excellence, but in the *Odyssey* it

is also a medium of cultural discourse and ethnic definition. We also move from the motif of the acknowledged but excused champion (Achilles), in scenes in which everyone knows everyone, to the more dramatic motif, in scenes in which Odysseus conceals his identity, of the reluctant but ultimately victorious champion. Odysseus' motivation comes not from seeking prizes but from avenging an insult and defending his heroic Greek identity.

Games in Phaiakia

In *Odyssey* Book 8, in the fantastic foreign land of Phaiakia, the princess Nausicaa, who had been washing clothes, picnicking, and playing ball to a rhythm (6.100–1) with her maids at the seashore, discovers the shipwrecked, bedraggled stranger Odysseus and brings him to the palace. After providing a banquet during which Odysseus avoids giving his name, King Alcinoös proposes games as a demonstration for their guest of local Phaiakian talents in boxing, wrestling, jumping, and running (*Od.* 8.100–3). Unlike Achilles, Alcinoös does not bring out prizes or make a public invitation to competitors, and there is no chariot race. These are not funeral games, nor are they open competitions for prizes, or cyclical festival games. The king wants to entertain and impress Odysseus with social, performative, or what one might call “diplomatic” sport.

Without nudity and with impromptu arrangements in the town square, but before the king and a large crowd, noble Phaiakian youths, including the king's son Laodamas, compete in familiar Greek contests (i.e., running, wrestling, discus, and boxing), but there is also a jumping contest. They compete not for material prizes but to display their talent before the mysterious guest and the king, perhaps with an eye to the unwed Nausikaa. The Greek hero was to be a spectator at an ethnic display arranged by a king along rather Near Eastern lines, but he will be moved to prove his athletic identity.

Having just won the boxing, the prince Laodamas proposes asking the visitor if he knows any sport, remarking that Odysseus seems well built and strong, although worn out and not young (8.133–7). Laodamas then courteously invites the stranger to compete in sports, saying he assumes Odysseus knows sports, as would be fitting (8.145–9): “For while a man lives there is no greater glory (*kleos*) for him than that which he achieves by his hands and feet. But come and contend, shed sorrows from your heart.” T. Perry (2014, 63–4; also see Dickie 1984b on Phaiakian skills) explains this famous remark afresh. Homeric Greeks placed military *kleos* uppermost, above the lesser glory won through sport, but the Phaiakians are non-Greek, nonmilitary people and thus inferior to the Greeks. “Indeed, the fact that sport is primary for the Phaiakians *explains* their inferiority, since they are never put to the ultimate test in war (64).”

At issue here is Odysseus' true identity as a warrior and an athlete, which he is still reluctant to reveal. He tries to decline (8.153–4): “Laodamas, why do you tease and request these things of me? Sorrows are more on my mind than games.” Having suffered much, Odysseus is in no emotional condition to compete, and he should be allowed to sit idly with a heavy heart, like Achilles in *Iliad* 23. Alcinoös had called for games when he noted that songs about Agamemnon and Achilles made his guest weep (8.83–95). Odysseus' body is still impressive, and he is not yet too old (Antilochos called him a “green” or “unripe” old man, *Il.* 23.790–1), but his spirit is weak. The Phaiakians should accept their guest's proper excuse but, still not knowing who he is, they cannot grant him unsubstantiated status.

Polite Laodamas had gone far enough and remains silent, but Euryalos, winner in the wrestling, jumps to his own conclusion. He offers an insulting explanation for Odysseus' noncompetition (8.159–60): “No, stranger, for I do not take you for a man skilled in games, such as are many among men.” He goads Odysseus, charging that he lacks skill in any event and must be a non-*agathos*, perhaps a maritime merchant, a seeker of profit (*kerdos*), not glory (*kleos*). The final insult includes Homer's single use of the term “athlete” (8.164): “You seem not to be an athlete (*athletes*).” His proper excuse misinterpreted, Odysseus insults Euryalos as a fool who relies too much on his physical force. He cautions him that different people have different gifts; he may have a fine body but he lacks wisdom. He continues (8.178–81): “You have stirred my heart in my breast by speaking improperly. I am not unpracticed in games, as you say, but I stayed among the leaders when I could trust to my youth and hands.” Like Nestor, he claims excellence on the basis of past performances. Now older and worn by troubles, he nonetheless says (8.184–5): “But even so having suffered many ills, I will make trial of games; for your speech is heart stinging. Your insults have stirred me up.” Odysseus is offended by the young man's rudeness and by the suggestion that he, a heroic Greek warrior, is less noble than a non-Greek whose claim to excellence rests only on nonmilitary athletic performance.

Words being insufficient, Odysseus proceeds to demonstrate his excellence by deeds. Without preparing his body or clothes, he throws the largest of the varying discuses so forcefully that the Phaiakians cower on the ground (8.186–93). Athena appears in disguise, marks the throw, and congratulates the victor (8.193–8; cf. her assistance in *Il.* 23 above and *Od.* 18 below), adding that no one present could even come close to his throw.

Odysseus won this discus throw decisively, showing indisputable talent, but he was still “stirred up.” He continues his claims (8.202–33) in a manner recalling the insult that he lacked skill in any event, as well as the Phaiakian claims to talent in several events. He challenges all the young men to any event, including the footrace, but he says he will not compete against Laodamas as his host, for that would be improper. He resumes his boasting,

expanding the range of contests to include archery and the javelin. He declares himself best of all mortals but adds that he would not contend with the “men of old.” It would be pointless and improper to compete against supermen or immortals. Finally, Odysseus repeats his challenge to compete even in the footrace; but, making some concession to his age or to the Phaiakians, he says that he might lose because fatigue and malnutrition have weakened his knees. The possibility of losing for valid reasons was more bearable than the idea of being insulted as a nonathlete.

After Odysseus’ lengthy challenge, King Alcinoös steps in to restore calm and order. He agrees that Odysseus has been insulted and that he has demonstrated his superiority (8.236–40). The Phaiakians could claim excellence in sport relative to non-Greeks, but not relative to a Greek hero. There are no further contests because Odysseus is now the acknowledged champion. Also, the king, aware that his guest is no ordinary man, wants to return to proper hospitality.

Odysseus’ excellence notwithstanding, the Phaiakians must have their claim to their admittedly different talents. Though not Greeks, they are nobles with divine favor. Adroitly shifting ground, Alcinoös admits their limitations in normal Greek events (e.g., boxing and wrestling), but he asserts their traditional excellence in nonmilitary, less-athletic areas, such as racing on land or water, feasting, harping, and choral dancing (8.244–9; Dickie 1984b). Performances (not contests) in music, dancing, and ball play follow (8.250–380). Odysseus courteously acknowledges the Phaiakians’ skills, exchanging a gift of praise for Alcinoös’ gift of recognition of his Greek skills. Delighted by his guest’s face-saving gesture, Alcinoös orders gifts for him from 12 Phaiakian princes. He directs Euryalos to provide a gift, a bronze sword with a silver hilt, plus an ivory sheath, and Alcinoös gives a gold cup (8.387–432). When a performance becomes a test of athletic prowess, such gifts—reminiscent of prizes in *Il.* 23—are required. In Phaiakia, the prizes are gifts of reconciliation and acknowledgement, like Achilles’ gifts at Troy. The offering and acceptance of the gift by Euryalos and Odysseus show studied courtesy. Once again, sport clarifies status relationships—and here also ethnicities—and furthers a hero’s social reintegration.

Iros

Familiarity with athletic conventions and spectatorship also appears later in the *Odyssey*. Back in Ithaka and disguised as a beggar, Odysseus fights an impromptu boxing match against Iros, the palace beggar and a stereotypical bully (18.1–107). Iros orders the stranger away from Odysseus’ own doorway, calling him an “old man” and threatening to fight him. As in Phaiakia, Odysseus “frowns darkly” at the insult and rude challenge. He tries to diffuse the situation by saying that there is room for two beggars, but his agonistic spirit leads him to add a warning (18.20–2): “Do not challenge me too much

with fists, nor anger me, or, even old as I am, I will wet your breast and lips with blood” Neither Iros, overconfident in his strength, nor the nearby suitors of Penelope, misjudging Odysseus on appearances, expect the aged beggar to fight. When the bully repeats his threat, the suitor Antinoös draws attention to the beggars’ quarrel as an unexpected bit of entertainment. Like Achilles’ men at Troy, the suitors, Greeks who passed time practicing with discuses and javelins at an area prepared for exercises near the house of Odysseus (4.625–7, 17.167–9), were familiar with athletic contests and prizes. They now arrange and transform a street fight for begging rights into a mock contest by providing officials, an audience, and a location within the palace. Antinoös instinctively proposes an *ad hoc* prize, a humble blood pudding, something intrinsically valuable to poor, ill-fed men (18.43–9). The pudding comes with the privilege of joining the suitors in their feasting, but there is no second prize.

Odysseus guilefully claims that, though old and overcome by misfortune, he will fight because “my rascally belly urges me on” (18.52–4). First, he wants assurances that the suitors will not interfere; he is not yet ready for open conflict with them. The suitors give their word, and Odysseus’ son Telemachos, aware of his father’s identity, also assures him, in effect as his second, that the fight will be fair (18.61–2) “if your heart and valorous spirit urge you to fight this man”—the real motivation behind the excuse of the nagging belly. There are no boxing thongs as in *Iliad* 23 because this is a fight between beggars, but Odysseus gathers his clothes around him (18.66–9). Athena, again joining Odysseus in an agonistic context, embellishes his physical appearance. The suitors are surprised at his body, and Iros, now a cowardly caricature, trembles. The suitors are disgusted by his panic, and Antinoös threatens him to keep him from withdrawing (18.73–87). Having revealed his body and his spirit, Odysseus simply knocks Iros silly with one blow, “lest the Achaians take note of him” (18.94) should he show his full skill. The suitors laugh at Iros’ humiliation. Again in a situation of unrevealed identity, the motif of the reluctant but ultimately victorious champion is used instead of that of the acknowledged but uncontending champion. The parodic boxing match ends with Odysseus receiving his prize. He goes on to wreak vengeance on the suitors and reclaim his kingdom.

The bow contest

The *Odyssey* approaches its climax in Book 21 not with funeral games but with a suitor contest for Penelope. He who would be king by marrying the great wife must prove himself by stringing the bow of Odysseus and shooting an arrow through the sockets of axe heads. The test recalls purported pharaonic feats in archery, as well as the archery contest in *Iliad* 23. Odysseus, moved by his heart (21.276), asks permission to try to string the bow. No longer reluctant to compete, he is eager to have his revelation and

revenge. Though having shown some prowess in boxing, Odysseus is still disguised as a nonaristocrat, so the suitors, seeing only themselves as worthy, resist his entry. Berating him as a beggar, they tell him not to compete against younger men, but Homer suggests that their real motive is fear of defeat (21.286). Penelope defends the beggar's right to compete, saying that he is big, well built, and claims to be of noble blood (21.334–5). As in Phaiakia, Odysseus' abilities reveal his true status, but here (as in suitor contests for Atalanta and Hippodameia) the failed suitors are killed.

Epic Sport as Spectacle

Homer's nobles are (or have been) warriors and athletes, competitors who demonstrate physical and moral excellence in public contests as a metaphor for war and leadership. Competition before spectators reveals a hero's true character and establishes his worth. Since it is assumed that leaders should want to compete, when nobles are excused or are reluctant to compete, acceptable justifications (e.g., sorrow, age and hardship) are required, but even in cases of noncompetition, heroes claim excellence and have their merit and status acknowledged.

In Homer's aristocratic society, games with prizes are held spontaneously and irregularly in contexts of funeral games, hospitality, and suitor contests. While non-Greek Phaiakians offer casual physical demonstrations, Greek athletes compete intensively and seek victories and prizes for their prestige value. As games organizers, Greek donors offer prizes as gifts to honor the dead, to glorify themselves, and to establish, restore, or ameliorate social relationships. Any valuable object, often from war spoils, sufficed as a prize to initiate a contest. Prizes are kept as treasures and not yet dedicated by victors, and athletes are neither wreathed nor nude.

Inklings of earlier and later ages, of citadels, city-states, and socioeconomic changes are present; but athletics and prizes were not yet fully differentiated out from the traditional matrix of social relations and gift exchange, and the most illustrious home of athletics, the festival at Olympia, was still, at best, in its infancy.

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Notes

- 1 Studies of sport in Homer include Willcock (1973); Kyle (1984); Scott (1997); Kitchell (1998); Miller (2004, 20–30); Tyrrell (2004, 8–29); Potter (2012, 24–33); Perry (2014). Collected essays on Homer include Morris and Powell (1997) and Fowler (2004). Translation from the *Iliad* are by R. Lattimore (1951); those from the *Odyssey* are my own.

- 2 On this passage and on Hesiod and sport, see Chapter 4.
- 3 Segal (1962); Hinckley (1986); Scott (1997).
- 4 See Roller (1981); Crouwel (1992); and Perry (2014, 54–57), on Geometric vase paintings of chariots and boxers, and Boeotian lebetes suggesting funeral games and prizes. For example, an eighth-century kantharos in Dresden depicts boxers with one closed and one open fist, with attendants with swords on each side; Yalouris (1979) fig. 10. Similarly, an early seventh-century Boeotian krater has boxing scenes on both sides, with boxers apparently having only one hand wrapped, and with men with swords and horses on either side; Tzachou-Alexandri, ed. (1989), no. 24, Athens, National Museum 12896. A Late Geometric amphora (c. 750) bears a wrestling scene: Argos, Archaeological Museum, Inv. no. G 209; Miller (2004) fig. 29.
- 5 On the archaeology and anachronisms in Homer, see Morris (1986); Mouratidis (1990); Sherratt (1990).
- 6 Kyle (1996, 108–11) and Papakonstantinou (2002, 52–60) relate Homeric prize-giving to aristocratic gift exchange and the affirmation of social hierarchies. Brown (2003) sees the awarding of prizes as an abstract adjudication of social value, a precursor to legal adjudications and coinage.
- 7 Allan and Cairns (2011) include athletics in discussing tensions between Achilles and Agamemnon in the context of community relations. Conflicting claims to honor and rewards threatened to break out into excess violence, and balance was needed for the good of the community.
- 8 Hammer (1997), reading the spectators as a constructed *polis*, sees the games as the context for the emergence of a new concept of political authority involving mediation with the community.
- 9 Potter (2012, 29) contrasts these funeral games, in which the organizer does as he pleases by aristocratic fiat in sponsoring games, deciding victors, and awarding prizes, with later athletics in which rules and fairness in proclaiming victors and awarding prizes must be upheld.

4

Archaic Greece: Athletics in an Age of Change

Nearby is buried Orsippos. At a time when it was the ancient custom of the athletes to compete in the games with a loincloth, he won at Olympia in the stade [sprint race] running gymnos [nude]. ... I think that his loincloth slipped off with his consent, since he knew that a man who is gymnos can run more easily than one wearing a loincloth.

Pausanias 1.44.1, trans. W.E. Sweet

The Archaic Age (c. 750–500) was a crucial formative period with rapid and complex developments in all spheres of Greek civilization. Greeks experienced challenges and changes: the revival of regular foreign contact and trade, urbanization and the maturation of city-states, dispersion of Greeks in colonization, revival of writing, major military reforms, political and socioeconomic upheaval, pre-Socratic philosophy, and dramatic changes in art and architecture. Sport, especially in the sixth century, expanded and became institutionalized in relationship to such developments, influencing or being influenced by changes in venues, contests, costume, politics, and participation. Juggling sources and models, historians continue to debate causal relationships in Archaic Age sport; some champion chickens, others espouse eggs.

Earlier, aristocratic funeral game traditions persisted, but the rise and spread of athletic festivals (regular religious gatherings with ceremonies and games), whatever their origin, laid the foundation for later athletics. By c. 500, the athletic world had been transformed by an explosion in the number, variety, and geographical scope of contests. Athletic festivals held at great “Panhellenic” sanctuaries and also in city-states (and more regional sanctuaries) provided regularity, structure, and a ceremonial context for an already popular activity.¹ The Olympics grew in its program and participants, drawing Greeks from further afield and becoming a prestigious model for athletic festivals. Olympia reigned as the crown jewel of a “circuit” of four Panhellenic crown games, which were similar in operation, prizes, and prestige. In the same era, most Greek city-states incorporated, expanded, or refounded earlier cultic games to gods and heroes as local athletic festivals with prizes of material value. Taking their sports with them when they went abroad, Greeks founded numerous new city-states in a broad process of colonization. The colonists not only returned to compete or watch games in the motherland but began to organize their own games in their new states. By the late Archaic Age, distinctively Greek features, like wreaths, nudity, and

gymnasia, had emerged and spread, as did the commemoration of athletic victories in art, inscriptions, and monuments. Indeed, the sixth century was an age of athletic organization or even revolution (Christesen 2007b).

Athletic Festivals: Types and Terms

The traditional typology of Greek athletic festivals contrasts the Olympics and “Panhellenic” “stephanitic” (crown) games with local “chrematitic” (valuable prize) games.² Early scholars favoring amateurism charged that the valuable prizes in local games (and state rewards for Panhellenic victors; see [Chapter 10](#)) ultimately ruined sport (Gardiner 1930, 99–103). S.G. Miller (2004, 129–49) refers to chrematitic athletics as “money games.” While *chremata* can be translated as money or something of material value, the potentially pejorative connotation in the term is unfortunate. Miller and others nevertheless hail the vitality of local games and suggest that material prizes may have widened social access in athletics (see [Chapter 10](#)). Rather than distant Panhellenic games, local games were a bigger part of the sporting experience of common Greeks.

In comparison with Panhellenic athletics at interstate sanctuaries, I have termed the Great Panathenaia and other such local games (held in or near towns and organized by city-states with extensive official state involvement; e.g., administration, finance, facilities, and prizes) “civic athletics.” Miller applies “civic” more narrowly to the specific contests within local programs, such as pyrrhic or military dancing events, which served to train youths to become citizen-soldiers; and he contrasts the “war games” of local civic athletics with the “nonwar games” of the crown festivals. He suggests that the two types of games differed in their judging of events—that crown games used only objective criteria (e.g., distance in the discus and falls in wrestling) while many (but not all) events in local games were decided subjectively (possibly by “style points”) (2004, 19) and thus were open to favoritism and disputes. He admits that athletes pursued and boasted about victories in both types of games, but he consistently champions the crown model over “lesser” games. Miller’s crown games (2004, 149) “... were truly an athletics for their own sake, unconnected with military training and conflict.” The division, however, is not that clear cut. Olympia adopted a race in armor, crown festivals knew violence and injuries, and many athletic events provided fitness or indirect training for war. Also, civic festivals at Athens and even at Sparta included both Olympic-style events and paramilitary ephebic (cadet) events, and local festivals gave crowns as well as valuable prizes. The nature of the prize is a convenient criterion, but Greece knew wide variations and combinations of features in games.

By the mid-sixth century, Olympia was the greatest of four Panhellenic crown games, along with Pythian Games at Delphi, Isthmian Games near Corinth,

and Nemean Games at Nemea. Victories in these four games, later known as the *periodos* or “circuit,” brought the highest honors. Victor inscriptions listed games in order of prestige, so the games of the *periodos* came first, but the Panathenaia and other chrematitic games were also listed below as honorific. States offered a vast array of local contests in civic festivals throughout the year: in dancing in armor, chariot dismounting, torch racing, male beauty, wine drinking, cheese stealing, team events, and more. Usually, Olympic-style events were open to all Greeks but there also were “closed” events restricted to local citizens or ephebes. In civic festivals, victors, sometimes in teams, in two or three age brackets, and even for more than first placements, usually won material objects of value (e.g., weapons and vessels), but there also were wreaths and remnants of early traditions with prizes of meat, hides, wine, or food.

Different games had different features and local legendary origins (e.g., funeral, Panhellenic, civic, and suitor), but the two main streams were funeral games and festival games. Most elements of both major types of games were not mutually exclusive, and by the sixth century, the two models were intertwined, adapted, and confused, depending on local circumstances. Both new and older games needed legitimizing foundation legends. From Homer, Greeks tended to associate games with the death and funeral of a hero, so foundation stories often aligned contests with the funeral game tradition. Historically, however, major games also were associated with deities; Delphi lacked a hero, and an artificial hero cult was created at Nemea (see [Chapter 7](#)). Many games probably emerged spontaneously and only later received attributions to heroes or gods. With the elasticity of Greek myth and legend, cults to numerous gods and heroes were quite normal and compatible at cities or major sanctuaries, and assigning precedence or priority to one hero or one deity for early games is difficult.

Factors and Features in the Growth of Athletics

The Greek athletic system was not an inevitable product of the Greek agonistic spirit.³ Multiple overlapping influences contributed to the great increase and expansion of athletic festivals, facilities, and prizes in Archaic Greece. Relevant factors include the sporting traditions of earlier ages and cultures, the impact of colonization; socioeconomic trends, military changes with hoplite warfare, the desire of nobles for forums for elite display, changes in body culture with Spartan physical education, nudity and gymnasia, internal political phenomena including tyrannies and more broadly based constitutions, and external rivalries among tyrants, aristocrats, and states.

As the most hallowed athletic site, Olympia was the model for other games, but Olympia’s success was assisted by other factors including colonization, interstate competition, and aristocratic display. Homer’s epics offered models

of games in funeral and other contexts, and epic undoubtedly influenced the ideology of Greek sport; but did epic or hero cult—or both—inspire competitions, or did competitions inspire explanations for themselves in funeral games or hero cult? If athletics were a form of surrogate warfare, were training and contests a preparation for warfare by a broader class of (hoplite) soldiers, or were games a means of status display by aristocrats displaced by a new and growing class of soldier-citizens? It was a complex and dynamic period, but by the end of the Archaic Age, athletic festivals helped strengthen the Greeks' pride in both their local political identity and their shared Hellenic culture.

Epic and Olympic authority

Perceiving history as in decline from the time of gods and heroes, the Greeks tried to validate people and places in the present through ties or analogies to the past. Priority, the quality or claim of being the first or oldest, and poetry, especially epic poetry, were historical influences in themselves, hallowing festivals and activities as objects of honor and emulation.

Homer, Hesiod, and the *Homeric Hymn to Delian Apollo* mention different early Greek games. They also present stumbling blocks for assuming prominent early games at Olympia. Homer includes no specific reference to the Olympic Games even though he composed c. 750–725 BCE, after the Olympics supposedly began (or were refounded) in 776. Homer does say that Neleus of Pylos sent a chariot and a driver to compete for a tripod in funeral games in Elis and King Augeias improperly stole the team (*Il.* 11.698–701). T. Scanlon suggests that the mention of a four-horse chariot (a *tethrippon*, not the two-horse Mycenaean chariot), unknown elsewhere in Homer, refers to Olympia and must postdate the introduction of that Olympic event in 680. Funeral games, however, were associated with many areas of Greece. Those in Elis, if historical, need not have anything to do with Olympia, and the reference to a *tethrippon* is probably a later interpolation.⁴

Homer's near-contemporary, Hesiod, writing in Boeotia c. 700 declares (*Op.* 654–9) that he won a two-handled tripod in a musical contest in funeral games held for Amphidamas by his sons at Chalkis. The sons put forward “many prizes” (*polla aethla*, 655–6), probably for both athletic and musical contests. Hesiod adds that he later dedicated the prize (probably a tripod *lebes*, a cauldron on a three-legged stand with two prominent ring handles) to the Muses on Mount Helikon, providing our earliest literary reference to the dedication of a tripod prize. Hesiod also suggests the goddess Hekate assists men in prize games: “Good she is also when men contend at the games, for there too the goddess is with them and profits them: and he who by might and strength gets the victory wins the rich prize (*kalon aethlon*) easily with joy, and brings glory (*kudos*) to his parents” (*Theog.* 435–8, Loeb trans. H.G. Evelyn-White). Hesiod accords with numerous later references to legendary

and historical funeral games with valuable prizes throughout Greece, but this epic poet also does not mention an athletic festival at Olympia.⁵

Homer's sporting world was neither Olympic nor uniform. As noted in [Chapter 3](#), Homer (*Il.* 22.158–64, trans. R. Lattimore) compares Achilles' pursuit of Hector about the walls of Troy to two types of contests for two types of prizes: funeral games for nobles with rich prizes and cultic games with lesser prizes:

... here was no festal beast, no ox-hide (*ouch hierion oude boeien*)
they strove for, for these are prizes that are given men for their running.
No, they ran for the life of Hector, breaker of horses.
As when about the turn posts racing single-foot horses
run at full speed, when a great prize is laid up for their winning,
a tripod or a woman, in games for a man's funeral

Funeral games for valuable prizes were more illustrious, but Homer acknowledges a materially modest class of games. The passage confirms two eighth-century types of games: funeral games and other contests associated with religious festivals or rites (Young 1984, 112). The early Olympics, if they crossed Homer's mind, were of the lesser class. Homer suggests that the original prizes in the lesser games (i.e., non-equestrian, cultic games open to the whole community) were portions of sacrificial meat or hides. These by-products of sacrifice were used as prizes to recognize achievement or status. Natural and agricultural products (e.g., foliage crowns, meat, grain, and oil), as well as textiles and pottery, formed a class of prizes distinct from the prestige goods of elite funeral games (e.g., metal vessels or live animals, or women) in *Iliad* 23.

Funeral game traditions are well attested in art and by their prizes (below), but the early festival prizes noted by Homer were biodegradable. Nevertheless, that tradition left traces at Athens and elsewhere, including Olympia itself.⁶ Herodotus (2.91) says that the Egyptian city of Chemmis near Thebes was exceptional in having a temple to Perseus and adopting Greek customs; they held "nude games" with all sorts of contests and with prizes of animals, cloaks, and hides. As well as mentioning the Egyptians' resistance to nudity, the passage attests games with Homer's lesser type of prizes.

Perhaps of the seventh or sixth century, the *Homeric Hymn to Delian Apollo* (3.146–61, Loeb trans. H.G. Evelyn-White) speaks of athletes, envoys, and spectators gathering for a festival and contests at the Ionian interstate sanctuary of Apollo on the island of Delos:

... the long robed Ionians gather in your honor with their children and shy wives: mindful, they delight you with boxing and dancing and song, so

often as they hold their gathering. ... [a man] would see the graces of them all, and would be pleased in heart gazing at the men and well-girded women with their swift ships and great wealth. And there is this great wonder besides ... the girls of Delos, hand-maidens of the Far-shooter; for when they have praised Apollo first, and also Leto and Artemis ..., they sing a strain telling of men and women of past days, and charm the tribes of men.

The context is a regular ethnic (Ionian) festival with contests or performances (boxing, dancing, and singing) in honor of Apollo.⁷ The joyful mood is reminiscent of Homer's Phaiakia with its sport, music, and dancing. Unlike Homer's funeral games, women and children are present, and there is no mention of funerary aspects, equestrian events, or valuable prizes. Interestingly, the poet barely mentions boxing, but he elaborates on the maidens' singing. Sailing home from Crete, Theseus is said to have stopped at Delos (Plut. *Thes.* 21); after sacrificing to Apollo, he and his youths danced "the Crane," a complex, winding dancing recalling the passages in the Labyrinth. Plutarch adds (21.2) that some accounts have Theseus establish athletic contests in Delos, along with the awarding of palms to victors. However, traditions probably changed as Delos came under the control of various powers. The palm and the other prizes (e.g., silver bowls) may have come with Athenian action under Peisistratos in the later sixth century or, later, in 426, when Athens purified the island, made the games quadrennial, and introduced a horse race (Thuc. 3.104.2,6).⁸

As we noted, Homer entertained his contemporary (early Archaic) aristocratic audience with stories of the athletic excellence of their supposed ancestors of long ago, but they were stories of activities that those nobles understood and enjoyed. As the tales were retold, recited, and in time written down, the athletic past of the age of heroes gained increased cultural force. Homer's immediate and later audiences believed that their prestigious forbears left them a legacy of agonistic traditions (e.g., funeral games for great men, rich prizes, events, and equipment) and an ideology of athletic *arete* analogous to military virtue. Later Greeks felt a cultural obligation to host and to compete in athletic games, and the prestige of excellence in athletics, as in war, remained an indicator of social status. The heroes of old had been great athletes, so the great athletes of later times were granted elevated and sometimes even heroic status.

Although not mentioned by Homer, Olympia was accepted as the oldest, most prestigious site of games. That Homeric epics and the Olympic festival—things shared by all Greeks—both included athletic contests, as well as religious rituals and a traditional value system, meant that later Greeks regarded athletic games as part of their ethnicity, as proof of being Greek.

Archaic games and city-state prizes

In Homer's funeral games, any object or creature of value could serve as an *ad hoc* prize, and Greeks saw prizes as essential to athletic contests. In Theocritus (*Id.* 22.27–135) the confrontation between the Spartan Polydeukes and the Bebrykian Amykos the uncivil Bebrykian does not properly welcome the stranger as a guest but rather challenges the Spartan to a boxing match. Polydeukes, as a Greek, asks what the prize will be. Amykos responds that the boxers were putting themselves (i.e., their lives) up as the prize, and Polydeukes responds that gamecocks fight that way. Greeks regarded their athletic prizes, like nudity and even pederasty, as characteristic of their superior civilization.

After the collapse of Mycenaean civilization, the onset of the "Dark Age" (c. 1100) brought reduced aristocratic splendor with a scarcity of prestige goods, but sporting traditions endured in myth and poetry. Funeral games perhaps existed on a diminished scale but, until the eighth century, athletic prizes were not a distinct category of objects designed and produced for athletic ends.

In the tradition of cultic games, the Panhellenic crown games became the most revered Greek games, but the older tradition of aristocratic prestige prize giving in funeral games persisted. Scenes of boxers, chariot races, and also, less frequently, wrestlers and possibly footraces on Late Geometric Attic and Boeotian vases suggest that funeral contests continued, but depictions of prizes remain uncertain.⁹ Aristocratic (mostly funeral?) games, as social events emphasizing status and gift prizes, connected Iron Age and Archaic Age prize giving, but, in the process, aristocrats and athletics adapted to changes in politics and communication.

In Archaic Greece, tripods and wreaths were used as prizes, and they symbolized victory in art, but we cannot identify any individual artifact *per se* as an athletic prize until the rediscovery of scripts. Organizers of private games adapted when the revival of literacy brought new means of self-promotion through dedications and athletic prizes. Self-declaratory prizes began when nobles started recording their prize giving on the prizes given. In fact, the earliest known Greek inscription, found on a late Geometric vase (an oinochoe from the Kerameikos c. 750–725), apparently refers to a dancing or jumping contest. Nothing in the vase's shape or decoration says "prize," so the donor scratched an inscription on this *ad hoc* prize to indicate its new function. By the seventh century, writing increasingly appeared on athletic equipment, victor dedications, and prizes. Similar to seventh-century examples from the Athenian Acropolis, a sixth-century cauldron from Cumae reads: "I was offered as a prize at the [funeral] games of Onomastos the son of Pheidileos." Soon, donor inscriptions on prizes spread from private funeral games to state games (Kyle 1996, 115–16).

Athletic prizes developed further as emerging states used games to promote and celebrate their civic life. Aristocratic leaders familiar with both Panhellenic stephanitic and private prestige prize traditions incorporated

athletic games and festivals within city life. Games and prizes offered earlier on an irregular, humble, or clan basis (valuable prizes in funeral games or lesser natural prizes in old cult gatherings) were expanded and institutionalized on a civic basis. While the Olympic model influenced the organization of such contests, organizers of state games, following aristocratic traditions and civic goals, selected and designed a range of prizes that combined cultic symbolism and material worth, most famously at Athens (see [Chapter 8](#)).

By late Archaic times, local games offered a variety of valuable material prizes. In the Classical Age (500–323 BCE) one Pindaric ode alone (*Nem.* 10.22–48, similarly *Ol.* 7.80–7) mentions a “contest of bronze” [for a shield] at Argos, Panhellenic crowns, Panathenaic amphoras, silver wine cups at Sikyon, the cloak of Pellene, and other bronze prizes “beyond number.” The desire to unify and promote the community led to the introduction of custom-made and inscribed self-declaratory prizes. Cities wanted to show off local products and local wealth by giving valuable prizes, even by means of second place and team prizes, because prizes enhanced participation, patriotic pride, and publicity.

Emerging city-states: regionalism and rivalry

As city-states coalesced as independent political units in Archaic Greece, they created new cults and games, and earlier localized cults and games became shared state competitions (Pemberton 2000). Newly emergent city-states used festivals, cults, processions (i.e., from an urban center to an extra-urban sanctuary), legends (e.g., of divine founders or the burial of local heroes), and carefully situated sanctuaries (e.g., at remote locations or on borders) to unify space and community and to mark territorial domains.¹⁰ States institutionalized cults with temples and festivals, and local funerary or hero cult athletics, often with horses and valuable prizes, also were incorporated into broader programs of civic athletics. Aristocracies promoted athletic contests as links to a glorious, privileged past and as status-reinforcing displays. Soon, ambitious and enlightened leaders also came to promote civic or state athletic festivals as positive shared experiences, as part of the civic consciousness of the new communities. Rivalry and emulation or “peer-polity interaction” (Renfrew 1988, 19–25) among emerging states further contributed to increased participation, intensification of competition, and the expansion of games and rewards. Producing athletic festivals let states declare their independence and resources.

While some local sanctuaries were used to define or claim territory, Olympia and others emerged as neutral “interstate” sanctuaries, sites open to all Greeks for religion, trade, and safe social interaction. Archaeological analysis of finds from Olympia and Delphi places these two sites of Panhellenic games in their local contexts and in relation to the emergence of city-states in the eighth

century (Morgan 1990, 191–234). There was a difference between the development of sanctuaries within state borders and those sanctuaries beyond the borders of major participant states (i.e., states that were active at the sanctuary), sanctuaries which later developed interstate functions.

Archaeology suggests that, as states institutionalized their own state cults, the elites of the emergent states spilled beyond their borders and increasingly participated in conspicuous consumption or status investment at Delphi and Olympia from the eighth century on. Later, states followed this elite participation by building treasuries and dedicating monuments at interstate sanctuaries.¹¹

As their ambitions and resources grew, states established valuable prizes to draw athletes from other states to their local games, and they offered incentives for their own athletes to compete at Panhellenic games. Some states, including early sixth-century Athens, introduced civic rewards and honors for their Panhellenic victors: sums of money, free meals (*sitesis*), receptions, seats of honor (*prohedria*), and more (see [Chapter 8](#)). Although these rewards were won by Panhellenic victories, they were not prizes, nor were they wages. In the aristocratic ideology of Archaic athletics, they were seen as communal gifts of gratitude, corporate adaptations of earlier aristocratic gift traditions.

Xenophanes criticized rewards and honors for victors in a poem of c. 525 BCE (frag. 2, Miller 2012, no. 229), saying that even if someone won a gymnastic or equestrian Olympic victory, “even if he should become a most glorious symbol for his fellow citizens and win *prohedria* at the games and his meals at public expense, and some especially valuable gift from the state ... he still would not be so valuable as I am.” He condemns the custom of honoring athletic strength above wisdom. “For the city-state is not a bit more law-abiding for having a good boxer or a pentathlete or a wrestler or a fast runner There is little joy for a state when an athlete wins at Olympia, for he does not fill the state’s coffers.” Xenophanes’ juxtaposition of wisdom and strength, his championing of intellectual above physical excellence, and his assertion that athletes aid neither the good order nor the finances of a city was repeated in later works (see [Chapter 8](#)), but athletic prizes and rewards flourished at home and well beyond the mainland.

Colonization: a wider world of sport

Pushed by limited resources and problems at home and pulled by opportunities for trade and land abroad, Archaic Greeks spread colonies, each one a new city-state (*polis*), throughout the Mediterranean. As they encountered non-Greek “barbarians,” Greeks became more aware and proud of their distinctive ethnicity, including their sport. Stories like that of Odysseus at Phaiakia reflect an ongoing cultural discourse on sport. New colonial states retained ties to their mother cities, and colonists returned to old

Greece to participate in local and Panhellenic festivals.¹² Some colonies established structures or made prominent dedications at Panhellenic sites. As colonies developed their polities and communities, like their mother cities earlier, they fostered local contests to build civic consciousness and to proclaim their status and resources.

Some colonies, especially Western Greeks in Southern Italy and Sicily (see [Map 4.1](#)), became famous as homes (or producers) of great athletes. In effect an expansion franchise, Kroton won rapid and resounding success in Olympic competition in the sixth century. Its athletes won at least 23 times in running and wrestling at Olympia between 588 and 484. Kroton won 12 (44%) of the 27 sprint races over that period. Strabo (6.1.12) claims that the first seven placements in the sprint at one Olympics (576 BCE) were all from Kroton. D. Young (1984, 134–42, 145–60) argues that Kroton became so successful through civic expenditure on lavish rewards and state subsidization to recruit nonlocal athletes to compete for Kroton. He suggests Kroton was buying “free agent” athletes and that its economic decline after 484 ended its record of athletic success. Young notes that an inscription of c. 600 BCE from nearby Sybaris records an Olympic victor’s dedication of a tithe of his prize (*athlon*). The dedication must have been part of a valuable reward, not a tenth of a wreath.¹³ As noted, Xenophanes, who had traveled to Italy, criticized such “gifts” as a general Greek custom.



Map 4.1 Greece and the Mediterranean.

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Whatever the secret of Kroton’s success, local ambitions and resources were factors in the spread of games. Later in the sixth century (c. 512), Sybaris,

seeking to be the home of great games as well as great athletes, instituted its own games with valuable prizes (Ath. 12.522a, c, and d). Apparently, it tried and failed to compete with Olympia by using money to draw off athletes to Italy. It seems that some states in the West, like Athens on the mainland, first offered rewards as a cheaper and convenient way to encourage athletes to represent them at the great games. State rewards were given unpredictably and infrequently, but holders of games open to all Greeks had to provide numerous prizes for every set of games. In time, as they prospered, states set up elaborate state prize games at home and tried to attract foreign competitors.

Tyrants: patronage and popular programs

As different elements in fledgling city-states tried to cling to traditions or to bring change, a dramatic but generally short-lived political phenomenon took place in several states, especially ones around the Gulf of Corinth. New autocratic rulers called “tyrants,” usurpers rather than kings, took control of states without constitutional ratification. With concentrated power and resources, and wanting to justify and reinforce their regimes by currying broad popular favor, tyrants often were active patrons and reformers of contests. Sources record many incidents and anecdotes linking tyrants and their families with Panhellenic Games and crediting them with fostering games, prizes, and facilities in their states, as well as becoming Panhellenic victors themselves.

Kleisthenes of Sikyon, for example, was involved in the reorganization of the Pythian Games at Delphi in 582, in which he won the four-horse chariot (*tethrippon*) (Paus. 10.7.6). He also organized a local athletic festival, the Sikyonian Pythia. After winning the Olympic *tethrippon* in 576 or 572, he announced a yearlong contest for the hand of his daughter Agariste, and suitors from elite families throughout Greece responded (Hdt. 6.126–30). Kleisthenes built a rudimentary “gymnasium” (a *dromos* and a *palaestra*, see [Chapter 8](#)) and made the suitors contend socially and athletically (McGregor 1941; Papakonstantinou 2010). When the year ended, he sacrificed 100 oxen, held a feast, and announced the winner. Familiar with old aristocratic gift-giving traditions, Kleisthenes gave a talent of silver to every unsuccessful suitor for their interest in marrying Agariste and for their time away from home. The Athenian Megakles won out over his countryman Hippokleides and the others, connecting his aristocratic family to a tyrant, and the tyrant’s grandson and namesake was the Athenian reformer Kleisthenes.

Also, the Peisistratid tyrants fostered sporting spectacles and facilities at Athens (see [Chapter 8](#)), and later tyrants in Classical times, especially from Sicily (Antonaccio 2007, 265–9, 283–5), had the resources to become prominent, if not widely popular, Panhellenic victors in equestrian events.

Gymnasiums, Hoplites, and Society

The Greek *gymnasion*, the “place for nudity,” used for recreation, physical education, athletic practice, and socializing, emerged in the Archaic Age, but the origins and even the definition of the facility are much debated (Delorme 1960; Glass 1988; Miller 2004, 176–95). The earliest gymnasia were simply natural sites at the edges of towns, suitable for exercise because they offered open space, water, and shade. Existing in some form in the sixth century and often associated with shrines and altars to various local heroes and deities, the sites were embellished by tyrants and benefactors. They spread widely in the fifth century, but the earliest physical remains are from the mid-fourth century Delphi, so historians rely heavily on literary references in Herodotus, Plato, and others.

A major study of the Greek gymnasium argues that the adoption of the hoplite phalanx, a closely packed formation of heavily armed infantrymen, led to the emergence of the gymnasium as a facility for the exercise and training of the hoplite citizen class in city-states. Gymnasiums, however, were not well designed for military training, and armies only occasionally used them as mustering sites, so it seems unlikely the gymnasium had a direct connection with military pragmatism.¹⁴ Also, the gymnasium was tied from its origin in some way to nudity, which was not essential for warfare.

A traditional justification of exercise in the gymnasium was its purported value in preparing citizen soldiers, and some see early athletic contests as surrogates or preparations for military conflicts (e.g., Reed 1998; Spivey 2004, 1–29). Indeed, Greek excellence (*arete*) was primarily public and martial, but, outside of Sparta and beyond ephebic or cadet training in later Greece, the actual military value of most athletic training has been overstated. The battle of Marathon was a strategic rather than an athletic victory. When Socrates (Xen. *Mem.* 3.12.1–8) rebuked a young man for not maintaining his physical fitness to be ready if the state needed him for military service, he was advocating physical fitness and civic responsibility, not intensive athletic training, for all citizens. Centuries later, Lucian (*Anach.* 24–28) had Solon advocate the ideal gymnasium-frequenting, physically fit citizen-soldier in an imaginary dialogue set in the Lyceum gymnasium in Athens, but intellectual and military critics of athletics charged that athletic training was militarily useless or harmful. Some specialized events, such as the hoplite race, military dances, and the javelin throw, mimicked warfare or were related to military developments, but athletics were at best an indirect form of military training (Poliakoff 1987, 94–103). Fitness was a military asset, but athletic training and nudity in gymnasia had more to do with status and fashion as the hoplite phalanx became the norm in early Archaic warfare.

As M. Poliakoff argues, rather than to assist training for hoplite warfare, athletics and the gymnasium were developed by the elite as a reaction against

the hoplite development and as an “outlet for competitive and individualistic impulses” (1987, 115).¹⁵ As the heroic individualism (the individual pursuit of status and glory) of earlier warfare was undermined by group efforts and the communal, cooperative ideology of the hoplite phalanx, aristocrats who earlier had claimed honor (*time*) by achieved excellence (*arete*) and by personal demonstrations of physical excellence in war and sport became anxious about their status.

When traditional means of status display were limited by the hoplite development and by sumptuary legislation (e.g., regulating funerals and tomb markers), aristocrats sought other ways to demonstrate their wealth and superiority and distance themselves from other classes. They pushed an ideology of “ascribed” or perceived *arete* based on pedigrees and family status, claiming that athletic excellence came as a birthright in noble families with sporting traditions. They turned to symposia, raising horses, training in gymnasia, and competing in athletics and equestrian contests, seeking public attention through victor monuments, odes, and prominent dedications at sanctuaries.

In sport history, traditional elites define themselves in part by their leisure activities—by the time, expense, and nonproductive aspects of their games. When more *mesoi*—nonelite but nonpoor citizens—gained the means to fight as hoplites, they earned social mobility and political privileges and they sought recognition based on their individual achievement (achieved rank).¹⁶ Soon, they declared their new meritocratically achieved status through the fashion of nude exercise at the gymnasium and, if practical, by intense athletic competition (Christesen 2007b, 2012, 119–34).

The spread of gymnasia, then, was related to the burgeoning popularity of athletics and gymnastic exercise, which created opportunities for display as society adjusted to compounded social, military, and political changes. Recent scholarship reads the Greek gymnasium as a forum for socially agonistic display and self-definition, a “text” reflecting social change, tensions, and aspirations.¹⁷

Nudity, Status, and Democracy

The human body—male or female, fit or flabby, clothed or naked—is the ultimate symbol. Since the dawn of time, we have used our bodies to communicate readiness to lead or breed, to fight or flee, to protect or harm. In Archaic Greece, disrobing fully to become nude for sport became an assertive communication of maleness, ethnicity, status, freedom, privilege, and physical virtue.¹⁸ One proudly removed the costume of everyday clothing to don the costume of athletic nudity.

Most Mediterranean peoples associated nakedness with impropriety, humiliation, and servile status. Herodotus (1.10) contrasts Greeks and

barbarians, saying that Lydians and most foreign people find it shameful if even a man is seen naked. Seeing athletic nudity in vase paintings and sculpture, some students assume that Greek cities were, in effect, nudist parks; but public athletic nudity was associated with specific contexts of exercise, processions, competition, and victory ceremonies. Athletes went about the town or sanctuary clothed, and they changed into their nude costume at the gymnasium or stadium. To be naked in public was shameful but to be nude for exercise was fashionable.

Homer's athletes were not nude,¹⁹ and the origin and early significance of athletic nudity remain controversial. Scholars have interpreted athletic nudity as a ritual state of purity for religious purposes, a liminal state in rites of passage, a remnant of hunting rituals, a form of magical protection, a matter of aesthetics, a by-product of homoeroticism, or a demonstration of self-control or sexual abstinence.²⁰

L. Bonfante sees the nudity of young males in art as cultural or ritual in origin. She associates nudity with eighth-century initiation rites because rites of passage in many cultures involve nudity or special costumes—some reversion to a ritual state of asexual purity. Nudity—the absence of a costume—was itself a costume. Bonfante further suggests a shift from early, religious nudity to the “civic nudity” of Classical Greece. Regular nude athletic activity in gymnasia became a positive expression of independence and a cultural statement contrasting free Greek citizens with noncitizens and barbarians. The costume of civic nudity communicated one's social status and made a claim to political participation (Bonfante 1989; also see Stewart 1997, 24–42).

According to Thucydides (1.6.5–6, Miller 2012, no. 5), the Spartans

... were the first to take off their clothes and, having stripped in the open, to anoint themselves with oil during their exercises. In early times, even in the Olympic Games, the athletes competed with *diazomata* [loincloths] around their genitals, and it is not many years since that custom was stopped. Even still today those barbarians, especially in Asia, who have contests in boxing and wrestling, compete wearing *diazomata*. Indeed, one could show that the Greeks of old practiced many customs like those of today's barbarians.

Note that Thucydides recognizes that non-Greeks had sporting contests and that earlier Greeks shared customs with non-Greeks. He claims that the Spartans first exercised nude and used oil²¹ and that athletes wore loincloths at Olympia “not many years” ago.

Plato (*Resp.* 452c) similarly says that until “not very long ago” Greeks agreed with non-Greeks that nudity was shameful and that other Greeks were amused when Cretans and Spartans started to participate in athletics nude. Christesen (2002) shows that the verb *gymnazo* emerged with the practice of civic nudity

in gymnasia in the late seventh or early sixth century; and scholars generally agree that nudity at Olympia was probably not introduced before the late eighth century but that it was a general athletic practice by the mid-sixth (McDonnell 1991). Not coincidentally, this roughly corresponds in time to the spread of Panhellenic games with wreath prizes.

Lucian (*Anach.* 35) and later authors invented flattering rationalizations for athletic nudity, suggesting that it inspired fitness, pride, or military worthiness, but the Greeks themselves apparently were uncertain about why athletes bared more than their souls, and showed more than their skills, to spectators. They guessed that nudity was pragmatic, that it made competition faster or safer.

Supposedly, the first man to run naked at Olympia was Orsippos of Megara, whose sprint victory is conventionally (but not certainly) dated to 720. Pausanias (1.44.1), who probably saw an inscription at Megara declaring Orsippos the first Greek to be “crowned nude” (*CIG* 1050 = *IG* 7.52), suggests that he intentionally dropped his loincloth because he knew that he could run faster in the nude. Ancient speculations about intentionality or accidents seem apocryphal. Despite modern experiments suggesting that the cremaster muscle lifts the testicles and tightens the scrotum during nude workouts, thus reducing the chance of injury (Sweet 1985, 1987, 130–1), the origins of athletic nudity probably had little to do with pragmatism. For other reasons, possibly Spartan influence or the rise of the gymnasium, nudity in non-hippic contests became mandatory at Olympia in the first half of the sixth century. As P. Christesen (2007a, 353–9) argues, Orsippos was not the first “to be crowned” nude because he was the first or only athlete to run nude but because he won the race at the first Olympiad in which nudity was required.

In the gymnasium culture of Archaic and Classical Greece, nudity communicated citizenship, social status, leisure, attention to fitness, and bodily virtue. As Christesen explains (2012, 177), those who frequented the gymnasium regularly and exercised nude acquired the desirable full body tan (including having a tanned backside, *melampygos*) of citizens of the privileged classes. Lesser citizens legally had access to public gymnasiums, but they faced pressures of social exclusion and public embarrassment. Working class men who undressed were “naked”: their tan lines and white bottoms exposed their lesser social status and their need to work for a living. To be “white-rumped” (*leukopygos*) also connoted cowardice and unmanliness.

Scholars have long suggested that sport and nude exercise fostered equality among citizens, fairness in competition, and a more “democratic” Greece.²² Miller argues that athletic nudity was an integrative factor associated with the growth of democracy (2000, 2004, 232–4; also Christesen 2007b). He suggests that early democracies, notably Kroton, correspond to early sites of athletic preparation and that nudity in the gymnasium became a political

statement and helped spread democracy (Miller 2004, 233): “The participants in the *gymnikos agon* [nude athletics] are democrats striving to excel with their beings, not with their possessions.” Supposedly, athletes of different classes were equal in games because nudity precluded signs of status (2004, 233): “... the *gymnikos agon* was for every man—and everyman”

In addition to nudity, Miller asserts that objective judging criteria in gymnastic contests of the *gymnikos agon*, and the use of lots and starting lines, indicate concern about equal opportunity during competitions, made athletes equals, and fostered democracy in Greek society: athletics created “the concept of equality before the law, *isonomia*, the foundation on which democracy is based” (2004, 232). He also suggests (2004, 17–18, 27) that the practice of flogging athletes for infractions, and the willingness of free men to risk and accept public flogging at Olympia, shows (2004, 18) a notion of “equality before the law,” which “may be the most significant contribution of athletics to the ancient world”

Did increased sport encourage democratic (or egalitarian) thinking and constitutional change? Miller’s notion of equality in sport is attractive but not unassailable. Olympia’s equality of treatment, from open access to nudity and flogging, may be more a matter of religion (i.e., equality before Zeus) or even sports management—than of legal or social egalitarianism (see [Chapter 10](#)). The suggested connection between nude athletics and democracy works best for Athens, which, however, was a wealthy, powerful, and exceptionally politically progressive state. All Greek states had nude athletics and at least minimal facilities, but constitutions ranged from democracy to autocracy.

Progressive socioeconomic changes and more democratic constitutions helped broaden participation in sport,²³ but training and competition, as traditional pursuits of early aristocrats and, by the sixth century, the moderately well to do, did not remove hierarchy from Greek society.²⁴

Men, Boys, and Erotic Pursuits

Historians glorify the Greek gymnasium for housing observant artists and loquacious philosophers, and nude exercise at public facilities undoubtedly stimulated improved artistry in vase paintings and sculpture, as well as discussions of beauty and love. Certainly gymnasia, like Roman baths later, were places where males were on full display, places to watch and be watched.²⁵

Scholars increasingly focus on how the combination of young and older males, nudity, and exercise invited pederastic erotic encounters in these male game preserves. T. Scanlon details the history and sociocultural significance of the erotic dimensions of Greek sport and education in the Archaic and later Greece. Rejecting the roots of pederasty in Indo-European initiation rites, he suggests that the distinctively Greek nexus of sport, nudity, and pederasty

emerged in Sparta in the seventh century, spread to other locations, and was fully institutionalized by the sixth. He presents nude physical education (*gymnike paideia*) as an effective form of socialization—an erotically charged relationship of mutual respect whereby mature males set cultural examples for teenage youths.²⁶ Whatever its origins, nudity added a spectacular aspect to Greek sport, something to observe even when athletes were at rest.

Sport has always been a sexy turn-on for both athletes and spectators, and Greek athletic nudity had erotic as well as aesthetic overtones. Long before there were gladiators at Rome, Greek athletes were sex symbols. Athletes could have erotic agendas, and victory heightened one's appeal. Philostratus (*Gym.* 22) says a trainer made a lying promise to Promachos of Pellene that the girl he wanted would love him if he won the *pankration* at Olympia. Pindar (*Pyth.* 9.97–100) suggests girls and women swooned when a victor returned to Cyrene. Art and poetry show that males also swooned.

Greek sport existed in a male-dominated society familiar with heterosexuality and bisexuality (rather than modern exclusive homosexuality). Specifically, the gymnasium's erotic dimensions were mostly pederastic. The poet Theognis of Megara (1335–6; c. 540s) wrote of the happiness of exercising nude and then spending the rest of the day with a boy lover. Plato (*Symp.* 182b and c) applauds pederasty, which barbarians saw as shameful, as a bond of friendship that inspired higher thoughts. He reports that the Olympic pentathlon victor Ikkos of Tarentum and others abstained from “women and even boys” while in training (*Leg.* 839e). Athenian sympotic vases (for drinking wine) with athletic scenes often bear young men's names accompanied with the adjective *kalos* (“he is beautiful”). Other vase paintings show mature men pursuing handsome young athletes with courting gifts of hares and gaming cocks (see [Figure 4.1](#)). Aristophanes (*Vesp.* 1023–5, *Pax* 762–3) declares that he did not take advantage of his prestige to make advances to boys in the wrestling schools, and a character in the *Birds* (*Av.* 137–42) imagines a father upbraiding a (male) friend for *not* making advances to his son while returning from the gymnasium. Reversing the usual age differentiation, Alcibiades supposedly tried to seduce Socrates by arranging that they should go to a gymnasium and wrestle together (*Pl. Symp.* 217c). States carefully regulated hours and supervised boys in gymnasia and *palaistrai* partly because of the age and status of the clientele (see [Chapter 12](#)). As N. Spivey suggests (2004, 44–53 at 47), gymnasia were “arenas for pederasty.”



Figure 4.1 Young Men and Boys on Athenian red-figure cup. c. 500 BCE. Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Germany. Inv. F 2279.

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Actively fostered at Sparta for military reasons, pederasty had a role in education at Athens and elsewhere, but it was predominantly a social fashion among the elite, one reflected in the pottery and poetry of that class and related to its associations with symposia, gymnasia, and athletics.

The Coming of Age of Greek Sport

Early Greek sport did not have a single origin or a linear development, and the athletic world of Archaic Greece was not simply a matter of ideal Panhellenic crown games and lesser local games with valuable prizes. Funeral games and even suitor contests still took place, and the great variety of events and prizes in local festivals reflects concerns from fertility to initiation and paramilitary training. The modern world has baseball, football, and tennis, but we also have lacrosse, rodeos, and curling.

Recognizable within the diversity of Archaic games, at least in origin or pretext, are two early and major streams (or contextual models) of athletic contests (and prize giving): funerals and festivals (see [Chapter 13](#) on Roman *munera* and *ludi*). Homer and Hesiod suggest that the most prestigious early pattern, aristocratic funeral games, had equestrian (and other) events, valuable material prizes, and a degree of social exclusivism. Variations from the same aristocratic world included suitor and succession contests in myth and society. Since epic authority and aristocratic ideology associated games with the funerals of great ancestors, the funeral game tradition inspired both the establishment of games for heroes and the explanation of existing games by

hero cults. The second model, the more inclusive cultic games in sacred festivals at sanctuaries, some perhaps in contexts of initiation, had ritualized contests of various sorts including athletic (especially running) and musical events with humble symbolic prizes. In festivals for religious pilgrims and to honor gods, these cultic games were open to all classes of Greeks. Both models perhaps were older than Greek civilization, but the Greeks adapted them distinctively.

In the seventh and especially in the sixth century, the two streams increasingly converged at sanctuaries and in city-states. Models were conflated, and etiologies were generated. As we will see, the earliest Olympics probably developed out of modest festival games with footraces, but the addition of chariot racing in 680 led to expanded aristocratic involvement. From the funeral game traditions and from Homeric allusions, chariots perhaps influenced the addition of funeral or hero-cult associations. At the same time, emerging states compounded cultic sports and aristocratic equestrian events, attaching funeral and hero-cult associations to festivals for gods. Local festivals adopted Olympic features (e.g., certain events, open access, lots, and judges), but they retained distinctive elements. Contests and prizes (e.g., in male beauty, agricultural products) persisted or emerged in local communities and lesser festivals. At Athens, some events (e.g., torch races and pyrrhic dances) were incorporated into expanded state festivals on a closed (citizen only) basis, often with shared food prizes. Also, in addition to participating at Olympia, Dorian Spartans developed a distinctively militaristic system of physical education for their citizens. For its part, Olympia experimented with hoplite and mule cart races from other games. Like the city-states themselves, Archaic Greek sport knew both broad patterns and local variations.

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Notes

- 1 Murray (2014) discusses the relationship between festivals, contests, and Greek religion.
- 2 On various types of games and prizes, see Pleket (1975, 54–71). Remijsen (2011) feels that the crown vs. prize game dichotomy reflects modern ideologies of sport more than technical ancient terms. Also see Scott on "Panhellenism," in Chapters 7 and 12 on categories of later games.
- 3 See Chapter 1. Miller (2004, 26) credits the rise of athletics to the Dorian Greeks during the Geometric period, but the Dorians were not the only vigorous and warlike ancient people.
- 4 Cf. Scanlon (2004). In another possible but unlikely reference to Olympia, Nestor (*Il.* 23.640) mentions great prizes for the chariot race in funeral games held by Epeians at Bouprasion near the Alpheios River.
- 5 Some texts that are unreliably attributed to Hesiod mention games but not at Olympia. The *Shield of Hector* depicts a city with men boxing, wrestling, and hunting hares with hounds ([Sc.] 301–3) as well as a chariot race for a gold tripod ([Sc.] 310–13).
- 6 For example, meat prizes at the Heraia (Paus. 5.16.3). On cattle and meals as Panathenaic prizes, see Chapter 8.
- 7 Thucydides (3.104.3–4), citing the hymn, says the Ionians gathered with their wives and children at Delos for contests in athletics, poetry, and music, just as they did in his day for the festival at Ephesus.

- 8 Later inscriptions refer to silver *phialai* for gymnastic victors, *IG* II 816.13, 814B.27, and tripods for choruses, *IG* II 814A.33.
- 9 Roller (1981a, 114–15) takes funeral game scenes as representations of contemporary practices, not epic. Detailing a continuous tradition of funeral games for recently deceased persons from at least the late eighth century on (1981b), she suggests that originally non-funeral Panhellenic games took on funeral associations.
- 10 Polignac (1995); Marinatos and Hägg (1993).
- 11 On Archaic and Classical developments at Olympia and Delphi, now see Scott (2010).
- 12 Essays in Hornblower and Morgan (2007) show how distant colonial elites used sport and victory poetry to proclaim status or ethnic legitimacy. On the Western Greeks, also see Stampolidis and Tassoulas (2004) and Antonnacio (2014).
- 13 Young (1984, 131–2); *SEG* 35.1053; Miller (2012) no. 220: “A gift. Kleombrotos son of Dexilaos having won at Olympia and having promised a prize [possibly a statue or shrine] of equal length and width [?] to Athena, dedicated a tithe.”
- 14 Delorme (1960, 9, 23–6); cf. Kyle (1987, 64–6).
- 15 Poliakoff (1987, 112–15); also Golden (1998, 27–8); Mann (1998).
- 16 Van Wees (2011, 28) suggests two ancient systems of competition for superiority: “open” systems encourage and celebrate competition, making it a basic sociopolitical principle, and “closed” systems establish hierarchies of status ascribed to individuals—not achieved by competitive effort. Open systems may become more closed as the successful persons try to secure their status by shutting down areas of competition, and closed systems may open up as those of lesser status enter competition.
- 17 See Morris (2000, 109–94) on tensions in sixth-century Greek society as elites tried to retain their dominance and non-elites sought more influence in state institutions.
- 18 On nudity, gymnasias, and Archaic society, see Christesen (2007b, 2012, 173–8, 2014).
- 19 Recall that Odysseus (*Il.* 2.261–4) threatened to strip and publicly beat Thersites if he continued insulting Agamemnon.
- 20 Arieti (1975); Crowther (1982); McDonnell (1991); Miller (2004, 11–14).
- 21 See Miller (2004, 15) on various explanations for using oil from limiting

dehydration to ritual anointment. Young (2004, 110) connects nudity and oil with the importance of massage in athletics. Lucian (*Anach.* 24) simply suggests that the oil helped condition the body and improve skin tone.

- 22 For example, Gardiner (1910, 60), "... [Olympia] was truly democratic. In athletic events noble and peasant met on equal terms." Young (1984, 175–6): "On the track, noble and non-noble necessarily looked alike, and the stadium became neutral ground."
- 23 Examining sport in both ancient and modern states, Christesen (2012) argues that broader participation in sport and in politics are complementary.
- 24 On the question of access to nude competition, see Chapter 10.
- 25 See von Reden and Goldhill (1999) on performative activities in gymnasia in Platonic dialogues.
- 26 See Scanlon (2002, 64–97, 199–273, esp. 211–19); Scanlon (2005). Also see Percy (1996); Hubbard (2003); Lear and Cantarella (2008); Lear (2014).

In Search of the Ancient Olympics

*Even as water is most excellent, while gold, like fire flaming at night,
gleameth more brightly than all other lordly wealth; even so, fond heart, if
thou art fain to tell of prizes won in the games, look not by day for any star
in the lonely sky, that shineth with warmth more genial than the sun, nor
let us think to praise a place of festival more glorious than Olympia.*

Pindar, *Olympian Ode* 1.1–7, Loeb trans. J.E. Sandys

The oldest and most prestigious Greek athletic competition took place in the festival of Zeus at his sanctuary at Olympia in the city-state of Elis.¹ Every four years for over a thousand years competitors and spectators came from all over the Mediterranean, from the eighth century BCE to at least the late fourth century CE. Ancient Greece was not a single state, but rather an area full of small, fiercely independent city-states too often at war with each other. At the Panhellenic (all-Greek) games of Zeus, however, Greeks assembled to venerate their gods, enjoy elite competition, and appreciate their common culture: their language, gods, mythology, and, of course, their passion for athletics. Vital to Greek ethnicity, Olympia reminded Greeks of what made them Greek. By Hellenistic times, the Olympics even provided the Greeks with a shared Olympic chronology.

Art from Olympia, including Myron's *Discobolos*, the Apollo from the Temple of Zeus, and the Nike of Paionios, still inspires awe. The simple stadium and the majestic ruins of the Doric temples at Olympia seem so pristine and noble. Pindar's poems lead us to assume that these games were pure and glorious. To be historically responsible, however, we need to look at the whole phenomenon of the Ancient Olympics—not just what we see through our cultural filters. We should recognize what has been overlooked and even denied in modern times, what may not inspire, what is of little comfort to Modern Olympism (e.g., brutality, materialism, abuses, and eroticism). As human as our own, some ancient athletes obsessed, boasted, and cheated, and their athletic world knew profits and professionalism, pettiness and parochialism. We also should consider what we do not see—what was excluded or subordinated. In works on Greek sport, the usual “other” is the Roman arena, but Greek sport had its own “other” side. We should admire the beauty but admit the beastly.

Unfortunately, the religious context of festival and sanctuary could not guarantee moral purity in competition, management, or behavior at Olympia. The Greeks themselves admitted that there were scandals, abuses, and

exploitation. The organizers in fact publicly deterred, exposed, and punished corruption. It was moderns who decided that Olympic history had to be pure, at least in its golden age, and that any flaws were due to internal decline and corruption from without. It was moderns who elevated Olympia to bolster modern Hellenism and other ideologies. Inconsistent with ancient reality but compounded with the ideals of the Modern Olympics, that modern mythology is evoked with each new Olympiad.

The Olympics of Allusion and Illusion

Every four years, the modern world turns to the host site of the Olympics for the greatest athletic phenomenon of the modern age. As a global village witnesses the rituals, symbols, and drama, people think of the Ancient Olympics and want to accept allusions to the athletic pedigree of the modern games. As the torch arrives and the Olympic flame is lit, audiences react with deep emotion. Most assume that the modern games are an athletic revival of the glories of Greece, that in major ways they are true to the ancient Olympics, not only in events and ceremonies from the marathon run to the torch relay but in their ideology of universal brotherhood, participation, and (until recently) amateurism. The issue of the relationship of the ancient to the modern games was especially poignant when the Olympics returned to Greece in 2004—not 1996, which was their 100th anniversary—and not to the ancient site of Olympia (except for the shot-put, for the first time) but to modern Athens.

The Olympics that returned to Greece in 2004 certainly had changed from 1896, but were they authentic—true to ancient times—even in 1896? Of necessity, the games of 1896 were a modern adaptation of an ancient institution.² Systematic excavations at Olympia had begun only in 1875, and Pierre de Coubertin's perceptions were rather loosely based on ancient sources. Unable to “go home again,” the Modern Olympics had to “return” to a new home in urban Athens, not to abandoned Olympia in rural Greece.

The program cover for the 1896 Olympics (see [Figure 5.1](#)) trumpets the theme of revival while glossing issues of transfer and appropriation. Its imagery combines ancient and modern iconography from Olympia and Athens. The myth of Herakles, the frieze of athletes in the temple, and the victor's olive crown are combined with French and Greek words to connect the Olympic dates “776 BC” and “1896 AD.” The cover also depicts a young woman representing Athena, not Zeus, with her owl overhead, and with images from Athens—the reconstructed Panathenaic (not ancient Olympic) Stadium, the Athenian Temple of Olympian Zeus, and the Parthenon or Temple of Athena on the Acropolis. Similarly, the Olympic medal of 1896 conjoins Olympia and Athens. Its obverse has a head of Zeus, with his hand supporting the goddess Nike (victory) bearing an olive branch, with the caption “Olympia.”

The reverse depicts the Athenian Acropolis and the Parthenon, with the caption “International Olympic Games in Athens in 1896.” In a similar but more embarrassing misappropriation of ancient symbols, Olympic medals from 1928 to 2000 bear a motif of the colonnade not of a Greek stadium but of the Roman Colosseum (Hopkins and Beard 2005, vii–ix).



Figure 5.1 Cover of program for the 1896 Olympic Games. Olympic Museum.

Liberated from the Turks by 1833, Greece in 1896, with Athens as its capital, was seeking to establish its own identity. The organizers of the games compounded ancient elements to link the more obscure and distant Olympia, a sanctuary with Panhellenic crown games, to more familiar and prestigious images from Athens, a city-state with democracy, philosophy, drama, the Parthenon, and the Panathenaic festival, but a city where the Ancient Olympics were never held.

Viewed through the lenses of European Hellenism and Greek nationalism, the 1896 revival had to be a modern reformulation of the Ancient Olympics as what one might call the “Athen-Olympics.” The founders drew heavily from Athens, as in the introduction of the marathon race (see page 96 below). The ancient pretext, the Battle of Marathon, was almost entirely an Athenian affair unrelated the Ancient Olympics. More “Olympic” images and elements would follow, some transplanted from Athens and some simply invented, including the torch relay, grand stadiums, team events, and cultural Olympics.

Coubertin as an Olympic hero

Like Heinrich Schliemann, the “father” of modern archaeology, Pierre de Coubertin, the “father” of the Modern Olympics, was opportunistic in promoting his project and himself. For many years, both men were lionized as pioneers and visionaries, but recent studies show that both were ideologues and manipulators. Schliemann apparently misdated and misreported details of finds; and there were modern versions of Olympic games in Greece, England, Europe, and North America well before 1896. The world had not forgotten the Olympics. In 1833, a Greek poet, Panagiotis Soutsos, had called for their return in his *Dialogues of the Dead*; and Athens had housed modern revivals of the games (in 1859, 1870, 1875, and 1889) financed by Evangelos Zappas with money, medals, and olive branches as prizes. Dr. W.P. Brookes had held local Wenlock Olympic Games at Wenlock in Shropshire in England annually since 1850; and Brookes, aware of Zappas’ 1859 games, founded a British national Olympic committee.³

Enamored of the ideals of the British public school educational system (e.g., amateurism, athleticism), Coubertin saw gentlemanly sport as a cure for the ills of France. As D. Young’s important research shows, Coubertin visited Brookes’ games in 1890, learned of his interest in combining the Greek and British games in a broader international project, and borrowed his idea of reviving the Olympics. Coubertin cleverly recognized compatible elements: elitist amateurist organizations fearing professionalism, archaeological excitement about the excavations at Olympia, cultural Hellenism, Greek nationalism, and Europe’s longing for peace. Coubertin wanted to use antiquity but not be bound by it.

Adept at imagery and marketing, Coubertin linked his passion for the athleticism of the British public school with elitist amateurism, and he ennobled his plan with the rhetoric of peace and harmony. As Young shows, he used a “bait and switch” tactic to lure amateurists to his 1894 Paris conference with a program suggesting a meeting to support amateurism. When they arrived, he presented them with a revised program espousing the revival of the Olympics.⁴ Although Coubertin and Schliemann were not quite the giants of classical scholarship we once assumed, they succeeded, where others might have failed, in fostering enthusiasm for great endeavors.

There would be no Modern Olympics had there not been Ancient Olympics, but that does not mean that the Modern Games could or should be an exact replication of the Ancient Games. The revival was joined with a then contemporary, but now anachronistic and compromised, amateurist Olympic ideology. It was assisted by the national pride of Greece, which had not been independent since antiquity and longed nostalgically for ties transcending its centuries of subjection as part of various empires reaching back to ancient times.⁵ Also, the revival drew upon nineteenth-century Hellenist enthusiasm, and it was increasingly confounded with pseudo-ancient inventions of rituals and traditions.

Reverence for Ancient Olympia was essential to the modern revival, but we should not view the Ancient Olympics through the prism of the Modern Olympics. Modern interests have led us to see what we want to see, or what we fear. Anachronistic and ideological concerns sometimes lead us to seek lessons, warnings, or excuses for the modern games. We should not push revival and continuity if discontinuity and reformulation are more historical. We should clarify which aspects of the ancient games were historical or illusionary. Our world needs symbols of peace and brotherhood, but we also deserve an accurate picture of antiquity.

Despite common misperceptions, the Ancient Olympics differed from our modern version in organization, competition, and ideology. They share the name, a few events, the four-year cycle, ideas of an oath and peaceful assembly, a procession, and highly competitive athletics but not much else. Always held at Olympia, the ancient games had no ball sports, no water sports, no weight classes, and no team sports. There were no winter games, no women’s events, no medals, no second or third places, no rings symbol, no torch relay, and no decathlon or marathon, all of which are Modern Olympic inventions. The Ancient Olympics are worthy of study in their own right and in their own ancient context, not merely as an anachronistic model or moral touchstone for the modern games.

Modern Myths and Invented Traditions

Some of the most compelling symbols and slogans of the modern games, the

very ones that seem most authentic as threads back to antiquity, simply are not (Young 1994, 2005). The 1896 program cover lacked some famous Modern Olympic symbols, notably the torch relay and the five rings, which were added later as the imagery of the modern games evolved. Although Athens and other Greek states had relay races with torches, ancient Olympia had no torch race or relay. The ritual of lighting a flaming cauldron was introduced in 1928 at the Amsterdam Olympics, but the ritual of lighting a torch at Olympia and relaying it to the site of the games was invented in 1936 by Carl Diem, Secretary General of the organizing committee of Hitler's Berlin Olympics (Segrave and Barney 2003). So artistically filmed in Reifensahl's *Olympia*, the relay traversed a route through countries that Germany would soon invade. More metaphor than artifact, the torch relay took root and its compelling symbolism of crossing borders and unifying peoples has blossomed. Surpassing its questionably ancient Olympic origins and its birth at the "Nazi Olympics," it has become an inclusive celebration, a human barometer of excitement leading up to the games.

Also cherished in Modern Olympic mythology, the Olympic marathon race was invented for the Games of 1896 in Athens. The inspiration was a feat of long-distance running associated with the Battle of Marathon against the Persians in 490. The messenger of Marathon supposedly was a heroic soldier who fought at the battle and then ran *c.* 25 miles to Athens, delivered the message, "Rejoice! We have won," and dropped dead. That tale of military and athletic effort—a citizen fighting to save his people from tyranny and dying in the act of bearing the good news—has such emotional force that is tantamount to blasphemy to point out some obvious historical problems. This inspirational event, however, did not happen exactly as is commonly assumed, and it perhaps never happened at all (Frost 1979; Lee 1984).

Details of the run were confused and semilegendary even in antiquity. According to the earliest and best source, Herodotus (6.105–6), before the Athenian army departed to face the Persian forces at Marathon, Athens sent a herald to appeal to Sparta for help. The Athenian Pheidippides (or possibly Philippides), a "day-runner" (*hemerodromos*), a courier trained to deliver messages by foot over long distances, ran *c.* 140 miles, reaching Sparta on the second day. The Spartans said they were busy with an important festival and could not come until later in the month.⁶ Herodotus loved stories of heroic feats, but he makes no mention of a post-battle run by Pheidippides.

Ironically, Pheidippides has not been immortalized for his historical run from Athens to Sparta but rather for a much shorter and historically much less credible run from Marathon to Athens. The popular story comes from later authors. Lucian (*Pro lapsu inter salutandum* 3), *c.* 170 CE, is the first, last, and only ancient author to combine all the now-popular details: a messenger named Philippides ran from Marathon to Athens, announced the victory, and died. Robert Browning's 1879 poem, "Pheidippides," spread a full-blown

modern version of the tale. His Pheidippides runs to Sparta, then runs back to fight at Marathon, and then runs to Athens to announce the victory and dies. It was Browning's expanded story that inspired the introduction of the modern marathon race in 1896. The Ancient Olympics simply had no marathon or ultra long-distance race. Greeks could run 26 miles and much further, but as messengers, not as competitors. Another improvisation, a tradition invented to suggest authenticity and add spectacle, the Marathon race remains a showpiece of the Modern Olympics.

Although admirable, the Modern Olympist ideology of promoting peace and brotherhood through apolitical, global sport emerged and developed largely from modern circumstances. As [Chapter 6](#) will show, the Ancient Olympics were not free of politics and manipulation, the Olympic truce did not stop wars throughout Greece, and not all ancient Olympians were altruistic amateurs. Much of the evidence disproving such Olympist illusions was "hiding in plain sight," but even experts would not draw the obvious conclusions. However imperfect, the Ancient Olympics were to be used for a greater modern good. Some scholars remain unreceptive to revisionism about the Olympics, and the man in the street and the media at the station still steadfastly refuse to let the myths die. People long for, even need, the nostalgic sense of hope and reassurance that Modern Olympic symbols evoke. The Modern Olympics are a living, evolving phenomenon, a modern sport spectacle, driven by modern circumstances and agendas. As demonstrated by the IOC's perplexing decision to drop wrestling (both the "freestyle" and the pseudo-ancient Greco-Roman events) from the Olympics of 2020,⁷ but to retain the modern pentathlon (a curious combined event introduced in 1912), the modern games are not bound by ancient practice, nor should the Ancient Olympics be obscured by modern agendas.

The ability of learned rationalistic moderns to invent and accept an exaggerated pedigree and pseudo-ancient trappings for the Modern Olympics should warn us not to accept too readily the many ancient stories and explanations about the Ancient Olympics, especially those about the origins and early years of the games.

The Quagmire of Olympic Origins: Explanations and Excavations

The Greeks cast the roots of the Olympics, like other things important to them, back into the mythologized, distant past of "before the Trojan War." They believed in founding fathers, so for them superhuman founders had initiated the earliest Olympics long before 776 BCE: one or more founders must have initiated rites and games in the first Olympics. Greeks accepted what we might call myths or political propaganda as ancestral claims and reverence for traditions and heroes. Myths and legends were comforting

narrative explanations, and different groups could have different and inconsistent accounts. In musings on Olympia, stories and etiologies, vague memories and speculations, were yoked mates as legends emerged, were adapted, and became accepted. Pausanias (5.8.5–9.1) says that when Iphitos restored games (after earlier games had stopped), people “had forgotten the old days,” and they added events to the Olympic program as they were “remembered.” He admits that the Eleans added events themselves simply “because they approved of them.” Various foundation stories were linked with cults and rituals, many were woven into poetry or depicted in art at Olympia, and a complex mythological tradition of conflicting and suspect ancient traditions accumulated, bequeathing the origins of the Olympics as a vexing problem for historians.

Privileging the ancient accounts, scholars have tried to accommodate and vindicate the several ancient versions of the origins of the Ancient Olympics. To untangle the Gordian knot of inconsistencies, they have discerned some threads and patterns (e.g., Ulf and Weiler 1980; Spivey 2012, 211–42). However, we must acknowledge the capacity of ancient societies to mythologize their past, to telescope eras, and to invent traditions, rituals, and institutions, which rather quickly acquired a veneer of antiquity and authority. Until recently, we uncritically accepted the idea that the Olympics had a single and significant start (and end), but we now are more distrustful. Did the Olympics really have one chronologically specific origin—one conscious institutionalization on an official, regular basis?

Olympic mythography

In one main tradition, Pindar (*Ol.* 10.27–77) says Herakles (the younger, the son of Amphytrion) of Thebes, celebrating his labor and conflict with King Augeas of Elis, established games “in Pisa” (the territory around Olympia) honoring his father Zeus. By the other main charter myth, also in Pindar (*Ol.* 1.75–88), King Pelops from Asia Minor (*Ol.* 1.24, calls him a Lydian) used divine assistance from Poseidon (or human trickery) to win a chariot race against the local king, Oinomaos of Pisa, and claimed his daughter Hippodameia as his prize.⁸ Noting Homer’s silence, Strabo (*Geog.* 8.3.30–1) says that at the time of the Trojan War either there were no games with crown prizes or, if there were, they were not famous; and he credits the first Olympic games, won by Koroibos, to Iphitos of Elis and Lycurgus of Sparta. Phlegon of Tralles (*FGrH* 2b 257, F1, 1160–2), a freedman of Hadrian around 138 CE, using Pisatan sources, wrote of early games by Peisos, Pelops (for the dead Oinomaos), and the younger Herakles, followed by an intermediate period, and then a reorganization c. 884 by three leaders (Lycurgus of Sparta, Iphitos of Elis, and Kleisthenes of Pisa). This late account claims that the Delphic Oracle ordered the leaders to restore the games (to remove a plague), to

declare a truce for the participating states to end conflicts, and to inscribe it on the Discus of Iphitos, which Pausanias (5.20.1) claims to have seen. Writing during the Roman Peace, Phlegon thus credits the early Olympic festival with a goal of peace and harmony.

Later in the second century CE, Pausanias (5.7.6–8.5) wrote a full and synthetic but baffling account drawing on the priests of Elis. He adds various traditions: the elder Cretan (Idaeian) Herakles (as one of the Idaeian Dactyls) set his brothers to race, wreathed the winner, founded games (held every fifth year, counting inclusively, because there were five Dactyls or Kouretes), and introduced the wild olive; Klymenos held games at Olympia 50 years after the flood; Endymion, son of Aethlios, deposed Klymenos and had his sons race at Olympia for the kingdom; a generation after Endymion, Pelops held the most splendid games yet at Olympia; other games followed (e.g., by Pelias and Neleus and by Augeas); Herakles of Thebes held games in which heroes competed; but after Oxylos held his games, there was discontinuity until Iphitos revived the games. Like Phlegon, Pausanias (5.4.5–6) says Greece was suffering from internal strife and plague, so Iphitos, a descendant of Oxylos and a contemporary of Lycurgus of Sparta, consulted the Delphic Oracle and restored the Olympic festival and truce.

Cumulatively, the traditions suggest three stages: some very early version of games (before and slightly after the Trojan War), then a time of discontinuity, and then a refounding or reorganization of the games around 884 or 776 by one to three kings of different states. The Olympics of 776 (or 884) were said to be a revival of earlier games inspired by oracular advice, after which people started to “remember” the events of the old days. As in 1896 CE, people preferred the revival of old games to the invention of new ones.

Probably the Greeks themselves did not really know or agree about the origins of the games, but reconstructions (and etiological guesses, e.g., Aethlios) arose in their myth-making culture. The conflicting claims of Elis and Pisa to Olympia complicated matters, spawning transparently invented founders: Eleius for Elis and Peisos for Pisa. Elis, favoring traditions with Herakles, supposedly organized the first 25 Olympiads (Paus. 6.22.2). Then, Pheidon of Argos supposedly initiated a Pisatan phase (tentatively dated *c.* 660–475), and the legend of Pelops became entrenched. Elean control was restored *c.* 472, and there was some reorganization of the games (Crowther 2003, 61–2).

The traditions reflect both the rivalry of Elis and Pisa and the Greeks’ understanding of their early sport history. Homer did not mention Olympic games, but his authority placed athletic funeral game traditions in the distant past of the Trojan War era. Later Greeks believed that their games and nudity came from Crete, and Dorian Sparta seemed to be the mainland source of sporting customs, so an early version of Herakles, with ties to Crete and the birth of Zeus, seemed appropriate. Myths of the labors of the younger, Theban Herakles, the prototypical combat athlete and beast-master, tied him to the

bull of Crete and had him clean the Augean Stables in Elis. The legend and cult of Pelops, prominent at later Olympia, were accepted as being of great antiquity. The Greeks had a hazy notion of disruption and warfare with the return of the Dorian sons of Herakles, so disruption of the games seemed credible, making a refoundation necessary. The games were revived and refounded (with a truce and olive crowns) with the assistance of semilegendary kings and under divine instruction from the Delphic oracle. Not really sure, ancient Olympic historians went in circles, chasing their own tales.

Later Panhellenic ideology contributed to the story of an early truce and desire for unity. Given the struggles between Elis and Pisa, the idea of a local truce to assist the games seemed appropriate; and the existence of an arbitration court at Olympia after the Persian Wars (see [Chapter 6](#)) may have been fostered by—or itself may have fostered—a traditional association of Olympia with peace and harmony. As Greek states continued to war with each other, an ideal of Panhellenic cooperation and peace arose. Longing became nostalgia, and the truce and peace were cast back in time and associated with the greatest Panhellenic sanctuary and games. A descendant of Oxylos, Iphitos of Elis and his cofounders (Kleisthenes of Pisa and Lycurgus of Sparta) renewed the games at the shadowy time of the legendary foundations of constitutions and customs.

Modern theories

These tangled traditions have invited multiple modern interpretations of the earliest Olympic contests as sacred rituals, funeral games, suitor contests, kingship trials, offerings to gods, initiation rites, reenactments of myths or heroic labors, spontaneous informal contests, and more. Emphasizing female fertility cults at Olympia, Cambridge scholars studying rituals saw the games with their life-giving vegetation wreaths as seasonal rituals including a sacred marriage of the goddess and the athletic victor. L. Drees suggested that mother-goddess cults at Olympia inspired games as initiatory ritual dances of girls to dispel evil spirits, which supposedly spread to men's events. K. Meuli argued that the games began as funeral games, with an armed combat as the original contest appeasing the death of the deceased. G. Nagy sees the athletic performances as ritual gifts of compensation honoring the corresponding toil and struggles of Homeric heroes in myth. Some suggest that early funeral games to Pelops, inspired by remains of a monumental tomb, became a regularized hero cult for Pelops (see Miller 2004, 90, and [Chapter 6](#)). E.N. Gardiner speculated that natural agonism at cult gatherings led to spontaneous games. U. Sinn suggests that early races and competitions would have emerged naturally at cult festivals but that specifically Olympic events came with the development of the cult of Zeus around 700.⁹

In sum, various models for the origins of sport in general have been applied to

Olympia, as if Olympia were the Ur source for all sport, as well as the birthplace of a singular Greek athletic tradition. Instead, it is likely that sport arose independently in pre-Greek cultures, that the origins of athletics at Olympia were humble and remain irretrievable, that the infancy of those games took place in the same nursery as Archaic Greek athletics in general, and that their distinctiveness and stature emerged over time.

Hippias and the Olympic Victor List

Once broadly trusted as a given for chronology, the *Olympic Victor List* (a catalog of victors in the men's *stadion* race), the cumulative result of efforts by Hippias of Elis in the late fifth century BCE, Aristotle, and others well into late antiquity, has been challenged (as noted in the Introduction above), especially for the eighth and seventh centuries.

P. Christesen's meticulous research on the Olympic Victor Lists (2007, 2010) as a genre of literature, including his vast collection of all the relevant sources (with a typology of list, chronography, and chronicle), convincingly demonstrates and explains serious deficiencies in Olympic dating for events prior to c. 600 (2007, 45–160.) He argues that Hippias of Elis rather casually gathered names from oral traditions and poetry, not from reliable archival lists, to fill in his list of victors and that his sources, methods, and victors' names and details are unreliable for early dates until the early sixth century.¹⁰

Christesen (2007, 147–57) further suggests that Hippias had no solid basis for dating the first Olympiad in 776 BCE. Wanting to sooth relations between Elis and Sparta and to bolster Elis' claim to supervision of the games via Lycurgus' early sanction of Iphitos and the games, Hippias used generational dating and the Spartan king list to come up with “776” and to link Lycurgus, the legendary founder of the Spartan system, with the supposed foundation of the Olympics.

Using Hippias' list of victors, Aristotle later attached sequential numbers to the Olympiads (and Pythiads), and Eratosthenes began the numbering of years within Olympiads (Christesen 2007, 172–5). The Hellenistic historian Timaeus of Tauromenium began using Olympiads to date historical events (Christesen 2007, 286–8), thus creating a chronological tradition based on athletic history that was widely used until superseded by Roman imperial and Christian systems in the third century CE.

We now challenge the tradition that Koroibos of Elis won the sprint (*stadion*) race in the first Olympic games in “776.” Pausanias (5.8.6, 8.26.3–4) says that there was no statue of Koroibos at Olympia but that his tomb on the edge of Elean territory bore an inscription declaring that he was the first *stadion* victor. This sounds suspiciously like a later ascription to mark and claim territory. Koroibos perhaps was the earliest name that the locals recalled, and his 776 win perhaps was a joining of the name, grave, and victory.

Supposedly, Koroibos was a *magieros*, perhaps a cook or butcher (Ath. 9.382b). He may simply have accompanied a religious embassy that went to Olympia for sacrifice (hence the cook) or consultation, and while there he perhaps won a casual or spontaneous footrace.

Any eighth-century Olympic games probably were localized and less noteworthy than aristocratic funeral games. Homer did not mention Olympic games because, in his age and certainly earlier, they were at best minor contests (footraces) in a cultic festival with symbolic cult prizes (crowns). Homer's patrons thought in terms of their own experience with funeral games with prestige goods. The stephanitic Olympic games neither arose out of nor replaced the tradition of chrematitic funeral games. Rather, footraces arose as a supplement to (perhaps annual) cultic gatherings. Later, aspects of funeral, hero cult, and suitor game traditions became attached to Olympia, probably as equestrian events and aristocratic participation increased after 680, around the time that the earthy testimony of excavation suggests that there were other significant developments at Olympia.

Archaeological insights

Hindsight has led many to assume distinctive or illustrious origins for the Olympic games because of how distinctive and illustrious they became later. The site of Olympia was first discovered in 1766, and German teams have conducted intermittent but systematic excavations since 1875.

Understandably, Olympia has yielded varying reconstructions. Early archaeology tried to vindicate literary sources by finding Mycenaean connections, but recent archaeology has revised reconstructions of early (and late) Olympia and assailed the inviolability of 776. It now seems that major games were not an original part of the earliest festivals at Olympia; simple games perhaps emerged only gradually.

Archaeologists intimately familiar with the site, A. Mallwitz and H. Kyrieleis reject any continuity from Mycenaean times in the form of a venerable shrine to the hero Pelops (the Pelopeion). There was a mid-third millennium tumulus, which was enclosed with river stones and paved with limestone slabs. It was visible above ground in the area of the later Pelopeion in the Geometric era, but nothing has been found inside the tumulus. There was regional cult activity from the late eleventh century on, and a cult of Zeus was established in association with the early tumulus, which only later was seen as the tomb of Pelops. Reexamination of the stratigraphy of the sanctuary (*Altis*) indicated that the Pelopeion lay above—and therefore came after—a stratum of black ash, bones, and votive deposits (with mixed finds from the ninth to the early seventh century), an apparent altar dump associated with a reorganization and leveling of the area around 700.¹¹ The cult of Pelops and the association of the tumulus with Pelops were perhaps as late as the seventh century (Ekroth 2012), possibly under the influence of Pheidon of Argos.

S.G. Miller proposes a parallel between the Pelopeion at Olympia and the shrine of Opheltes at Nemea. He suggests that the hero cult to Pelops was the original cult center at Olympia in the Geometric era, which was later supplanted by a cult to Zeus. He also suggests that dedications of bridles and bits in the area suggest horse races and possibly an early hippodrome. He argues that since early Nemea, which emulated Olympia, had a sixth-century complex of facilities for horse and foot races on either side of the Ophelteion, both the earliest stadium (Stadium I) and an early hippodrome at Olympia perhaps started from the area of the Pelopeion (Miller 2002, 2004, 89–90, 124). Equestrian dedications, however, do not prove horse races. A Zeus cult probably existed at Olympia before there were games, and the hero cult at Nemea was essentially invented on the spot (see [Chapter 7](#)). Given the complex archaeological evidence, it is best just to agree with Pausanias (5.13.1) that the Eleans at Olympia honored Pelops above other heroes and Zeus above other gods.

Archaeologist C. Morgan (1990, 27–105; also Scott 2010, 146–7) characterizes Geometric Olympia as a typical, rural, remote sanctuary for a local Zeus cult until major changes took place in the eighth century, when it developed into an interstate sanctuary in the era of state formation. She identifies the numerous tripods and figurines found at Olympia as votive dedications rather than athletic prizes (or athletic dedications) for on-site games. From c. 800 on, existing activity from the Western Peloponnese intensified, and from c. 725 on, Olympia gained a new prominent local role as an Elean regional sanctuary with important ties to emerging states and Western Greece. Morgan feels that the increase in dedications c. 725 may be related to games and that the late eighth century is the most likely time for the development of significant games.

Arguing that cult preceded games at Olympia, Mallwitz (1988, 96–101) studied some 200 wells dug near the stadium and concluded that the earliest games traditionally dated from 776, if historical, were humble and local (and perhaps annual) and that major games did not emerge until c. 700 or even 680, when the addition of equestrian events allowed more conspicuous displays at Olympia. Also, the location of Stadium I under Stadium II, as wells indicate, shows that the center of cult and the setting of games were already as far apart at the start of the seventh century as they were later.

Similarly, Sinn (2000, 11–13, 15–22) suggests that early Olympia was not grand, athletic, or unique. Just one of several local sanctuaries in the valley of the Alpheios River, it housed an oracle (Pind. *Ol.* 8.1–2; Strabo, *Geog.* 8.3.30) and various cults associated with fertility and agriculture. Early festivals may have included competitions (e.g., in dance, music, and running) typical of convivial Greek festivals, but these were not “specifically Olympian events.” Olympia’s oracular seers, the Iamids (e.g., Teisamenos, see Hdt. 9.33–5; Paus. 3.11.6.) and Klytiads sacrificed, read Zeus’ will, traveled with armies, and

gave advice before battles, leading to generous military votives of arms and armor at Olympia (see Siewert 1992, 116–17; Spivey 2012, 174–7, 182–3). These victory monuments and large tripod kettles were not athletic prizes but thank offerings for advice in war. Agricultural cults and oracular advice, not Panhellenic athletics, dominated early Olympia. Sinn agrees with Morgan that the crucial stage came with colonization, when Olympia emerged as a regular meeting place for Greeks from Italy and Sicily. With more visitors, Elis expanded the sacred area (controlling the Kladeos River with a wall), leveled the area of the later Pelopeion, dug more wells, and built the first stadium. Chariot races soon followed, and Olympia increasingly drew more competitors and spectators.

Deconstructing and reconstructing early Olympia

For the Greeks, something as magnificent as the Olympic Games had to be connected with the glorious past when gods and heroes walked the earth, so they sought and found, or fashioned, explanations linking the present and the distant past. In Archaic Greece, Elis and Pisa contested, with war and words, for legitimate control of the sanctuary, and the stories grew with variations buttressing rival claims to the site. By the Classical Age of Pindar, when Olympia housed truly grand games, the numerous legends seemed credible, and many were depicted artistically at Olympia, as in the sculpture of the Temple of Zeus. The combination of problems concerning traditional accounts and the early Olympic Victor List with new archaeological reconstructions now recommends downdating the rise of a major athletic festival at Olympia to the late eighth century. Indeed, great oaks do come from humble acorns.

Olympia's history as a center of sport, and not just cult, began in the Archaic and not the Bronze or Dark Age. There may have been occasional funeral games in the general area, as Homer suggests, but the evidence (votive dedications, the Altis, and wells near the early stadium) indicates that modest local games emerged slowly as a supplement to an existing Zeus cult, not from funeral games or a hero cult for Pelops. From a sacral, materially humbler, and less elitist tradition, an epiphenomenal addition to gatherings for cultic and oracular activity at Olympia, the games became more significant when increasing numbers of nonlocal aristocrats participated, especially in equestrian events (from c. 680). Aristocrats did not need wealth from valuable prizes, but they craved the status-reinforcing prestige associated with conspicuous display through dedications and competition at Olympia.

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Notes

- 1 See Drees (1968); Herrmann (1989); Sinn (2000); Phillips and Pritchard (2003); Kaila et al. (2004); Miller (2004, 87–95, 113–28); Crowther (2004); Nielsen (2007); Scott (2010). Idealistic treatments include Yalouris (1979); Tzachou-Alexandri (1989); Valavanis (2004, 20–161). Popular but useful works include Finley and Pleket (1976); Swaddling (1999); Young (2004); Spivey (2012); Tyrrell (2004); Beale (2011); Faulkner (2012). König (2005) reviews several works that appeared around the 2004 Olympics.

- 2 On ritualistic and aristocratic aspects of Olympism, see Mandell (1976) and MacAloon (1981). On 1896, see Young (1996, 2004, 138–57). Golden (2008, 105–42) contrasts elements of the Ancient and Modern Olympics.
- 3 See Young (1984, 28–43, 69–71, 1996, 1–23, 42–5, 2004, 138–57); Georgiadis (2004); Lee (2011).
- 4 Young (1984, 57–75, 179–81, 1996, 96–105).
- 5 The modern reception of the Ancient Olympics is crucial for Modern Greek nostalgia and ethnic pride. See Kitroeff (2004); Fournaraki and Papkonstantinou (2011); Goff and Simpson (2011).
- 6 Whether the delay was due solely to the Spartans’ famous piety or partly to Greek particularism is debatable; see Kyle (2010, 42–6).
- 7 Associated Press 2.13.2013; after protests, the decision was retracted seven months later.
- 8 See Howie (1991); Hansen (2000); Davidson (2003).
- 9 For example, Harrison (1912, 212–59); Drees (1962); Meuli (1941), cf. Poliakoff (1987, 149–58); Nagy (1986); Gardiner (1930, 31–3); Sinn (2000, 12–13). For a theory involving a torch race, see Valavanis (2006). Instone (2007) notes possible religious, military, and other factors but cautions against monocausal explanations.
- 10 Also see Golden (1998, 43–5, 63–5); Miller (2004, 226–7); Wacker (1998). For a dated but still helpful list of ancient Olympic victors (in Italian, with commentary), see Moretti (1957).
- 11 Mallwitz (1988) and Kyrieleis (2003, esp. 52–5). On votives and the black layer, see Kyrieleis (2002, 177–220).

6

Ancient Olympia and Its Games

I cannot, just by telling you about it, convince you of the pleasure of what happens at such a festival as well as you would learn for yourself, sitting in the middle of the crowd, watching the arete of men and physical beauty, amazing conditioning and great skill and irresistible force and daring and pride and unbeatable determination and indescribable passion for victory. I know that you would not stop praising and cheering and applauding.

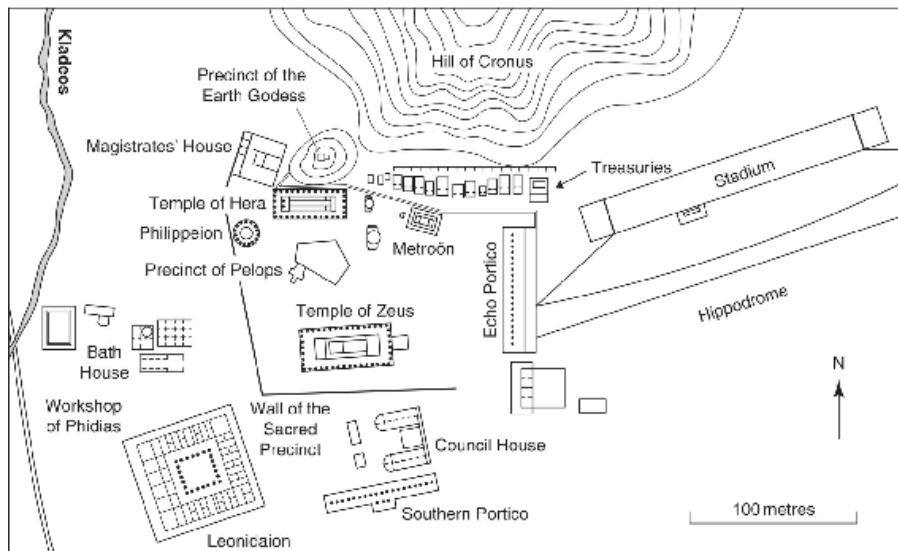
Lucian, *Anacharsis* 12, trans. Miller 2012, no. 113.

As noted in [Chapter 5](#), any Olympic Games in 776 were modest, local, nonfuneral games, and they did not expand much until the late eighth century. A crucial development was the spread of Greeks all over the Mediterranean basin by colonization, especially to the west, for colonies cherished the games as ties to the motherland. Olympia was an attractive and centrally located place of assembly in the expanding Greek world, and Olympia's program and crowds grew accordingly. The success of the fledgling gymnastic games also was aided by the addition of equestrian events (central to the earlier funerary tradition), patronage from aristocrats and tyrants, rivalry among emerging states, and the spread of state rewards that enhanced the benefits of Olympic victory. Rather than being immune to politics or factionalism, Olympia became a prime locus for competitive display among aristocrats and city-states. Athletic and extra-athletic performances turned Olympia into a spectacular Panhellenic center, and the Olympic Games became the model for other Panhellenic crown games and also, to some degree, for state games.¹

The Physical Context: Sanctuary and Facilities

Olympia was a religious sanctuary on the Alpheios River in the northwestern Peloponnese.² Not a city but rather a center of cults and contests, it lay roughly 60 km (by road) from the city of Elis (and 16 from the sea). Modern models of the site at its height under the Roman Empire are based on archaeology and the writings of Pausanias, who visited Olympia c. 160–170 CE and devoted two books (five and six) of his *Description of Greece* to Olympia (and only one to Athens). He left a detailed, accurate account of what he saw, but he viewed the site at the peak of its splendor. By his time, the grandeur of Olympia had inspired inflated notions of the antiquity and emergence of the games (see [Chapter 5](#)).

The enduring center of the site was the Altis (from *alsos*, grove) or sacred precinct of Zeus, which was marked by a low wall. Early simple cultic arrangements included open-air altars, notably the great ash Altar of Zeus, shrines, and places for dedications among the trees. The grandest early constructions, such as the Temple of Hera, were within the Altis. The precinct also housed an oracle of Zeus with seers highly respected for their military advice. For centuries, the site's main features were religious, and athletic facilities developed slowly around the periphery (Map 6.1). The site itself thus suggests that games were a supplement to the festival to Zeus. Religion was at the center, and sport expanded around it. The hierarchy was clear: gods first, athletes second, and spectators third.



Map 6.1 Olympia c. 325 BCE.

From the seventh century on, and especially in the Classical Age (500–323) and again in the second century CE, the sanctuary was embellished with architectural and artistic marvels. After the construction of the archaic Doric Temple of Hera c. 625–600, so-called treasuries, (at least 15) small temples and storehouses, were built (c. 600–450) on a nearby terrace, mostly by western colonies (e.g., Syracuse and Gela). The largest Doric temple in the Peloponnese, the Temple of Zeus (c. 470–456), designed by Libon of Elis, with sculptural scenes from myths of Pelops, Herakles, and Theseus, housed a colossal (13 m high) chryselephantine statue of Zeus (c. 430) by Pheidias of Athens, hailed as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. There also were facilities for officials (e.g., Prytaneion or Magistrates' House and Bouleuterion or Council House), other altars, shrines, and temples (e.g., Pelopeion and Metroön), and various stoas. The plan of the Altis was largely set by the late fourth century BCE, but with time the area became even more cluttered with dedications and victor statues. Pausanias mentions some 200

inscriptions on such monuments (Lattimore 1988; Raschke 1988b). Olympic victors were allowed to put up votive statues, and a thrice-victorious athlete could establish a portrait or “iconic” statue of himself (Plin. *HN* 34.8.16).

Except for equestrian events, almost all contests took place in the stadium, but even in its later phases this most hallowed venue of Greek sport strikes moderns as surprisingly Spartan. Beyond the Altis with its grand buildings, the stadium (now restored to its condition *c.* 350 BCE) was a simple running track for athletes with grassy embankments for spectators (see [Figure 6.1](#)). The Elean hosts did not have to “build it” to have them come to Olympia. The athletes and spectators kept the stadium in use, with Hellenistic and Roman renovations, for several centuries, but there was no assigned or permanent seating except for a small area for officials (Paus. 6.20.8). Stadia elsewhere acquired extensive stone seating, but Olympia did not, perhaps because the area was originally the domain of Demeter Chamyne, a goddess of agriculture, as indicated by a seat-altar of Roman times in the embankment opposite the judges’ area (Sinn 2000, 74). Although the stadium is modest, the man-made embankments indicate early attention to spectatorship.



Figure 6.1 Stadium at Olympia with track, judges’ area, altar of Demeter, and Krypte tunnel at end.

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Some suggest that the original racecourse extended into the Altis near the Altar of Zeus, but the exact location of the earliest stadium remains uncertain. Wells dug *c.* 700, and a retaining wall of *c.* 550 for a low embankment on the south side, indicate an archaic stadium, which extended out from the eastern edge of the Altis (Mallwitz 1988, 94–5; Romano 1993, 17–24). A stadium of

c. 500, perhaps slightly further to the east, had a higher south embankment. The next stadium was shifted 12 m to the north and 75 m further east c. 475–450. This stadium had embankments on the south, north, and west, with a capacity of c. 40,000 and a track area roughly 212 by 28.5 m, with starting lines (in narrow slabs of stone) c. 192 m apart. Runners stood upright with their toes in grooves in the stone starting sills (*balbides*). Holes for turning posts (*kampteres*) indicate lanes for up to 20 runners, and a similar line lay at the opposite end of the track. For centuries the start was auditory, and false starters were flogged. The construction of the Stoa of Echo in the mid-fourth century BCE further closed off the sanctuary from the stadium, but this was simply an architectural and topographical adjustment to the growth of the games—not a sign of secularization. The vaulted ceremonial entrance tunnel, the Krypte, formerly seen as a later addition of the second century, is probably from the second half of the fourth century BCE. It provided a dramatic entrance for officials and athletes, who prepared nearby in a changing room (*apodyterion*) between the back wall of the Stoa of Echo and the stadium embankment. By c. 300, the stadium had a starting mechanism (*hysplex*), as well as a water system with small channels at the edge of the track.³

The hippodrome, the racecourse for horses and chariots, lay to the southeast and parallel to the stadium.⁴ Pausanias (6.20.10–19) notes a shrine of Taraxippos, the “Horse-Terrifier,” placed at the perilous first turn in pious recognition of the danger. One of the turning posts bore a statue of Hippodameia, wife of Pelops (Paus. 6.20.19). In the mid-fifth century, Kleoitias of Athens (Paus. 6.20.10–14) designed an elaborate set of starting gates (the *aphesis*) for perhaps 20 or more chariots, arranged like the prow of a ship. A sequential starting mechanism released the outer chariots first and the inner ones later (Harris 1968; Crowther 1993, 46–8; Miller 2004, 81–2). Figures of an eagle and a dolphin signaled the start, but there was no central barrier. Races were intense, dangerous, and spectacularly entertaining for crowds, which perhaps were larger than could fit in the stadium.

The site of the hippodrome was flooded and silted over in antiquity, and despite some recent interest and test excavations, no structures have been confirmed. Any traces of the hippodrome are probably completely lost (Potter 2012, 372, n. 3).

The Olympic Festival: Operation and Administration

Athletics were only part of the festival to Zeus at Olympia.⁵ A regular gathering for worship with processions, sacrifices (see [Figure 6.2](#)), prayers, feasting, and convivial celebration took place at the same site every four years. It was held in late summer (July–August) at the second full moon after

the summer solstice, and it grew from initially one to five days (by the fifth century). The timing corresponded with a lull in agricultural work after the harvest, and the event was correlated with an astronomical phenomenon understood by all (see [Chapter 1](#) on the Antikythera mechanism), rather than with any civic chronology, for each state had its own system. This crucial combination of festival, sanctuary, and games was possibly serendipitous but certainly salutary. It provided a regular, hallowed context for games, helping them last for well over a thousand years. Athletes promised votive offerings, swore sacred oaths, and competed for the glory—and under the eyes—of Zeus. Victors felt they were divinely favored, and the prize remained a crown of olive leaves cut from the sacred grove of Zeus. Athletics increased over time at Olympia, with more events, dedications, statues, and expanded facilities, but the games never overtook or secularized the festival. Greeks did not embrace the separation of church and stadium.⁶ Olympic sport was not a surrogate or secular religion; it was the persistence of pagan piety that later brought Christian opposition.



Figure 6.2 Athletes in scene of sacrifice, c. 460–440 BCE. Red-figured stamnos, attributed to Polygnotos, painted pottery, Athens 450–430 BCE.

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The area of Hollow Elis, north of the town of Elis, was an oligarchic political unit from earlier times, but the full unification of the city-state of Elis took place as late as c. 471, so reliable information on the organization and financing of the early Olympics is limited.⁷ The original festival perhaps was annual, and the four-year cycle for the expanded festival may have been a matter of practicality. It would have been a financial and logistical burden for Elis to organize a major festival—and for athletes and spectators to come from afar—every year.

Preparations for the games began long before at Elis with the selection of

highly revered supervisory officials, originally called *daitateres*. From 580 BCE, there were two games organizers called *agonothetai*; by c. 480, they were called *Hellanodikai*, “judges of the Greeks.” By 400, there were nine, and from 348 BCE, the number remained at ten (Paus. 5.9.4–6). Citizens of Elis, chosen by lot on a tribal basis, learned the proper customs (*nomos Olympiakos*) from Elean officials (*nomothetai*; Paus. 6.24.3) at Elis for ten months. As the sponsor of the games, Elis had headquarters for these officials (the *Hellanodikaion*) and training facilities for athletes. Adult athletes were to have been in training for ten months, and boys and men had to train at Elis for a month prior to the games (Philostr. VA 5.43). At Elis, the judges supervised and scrutinized the athletes to ensure their quality and to dissuade or dismiss any unworthy competitors (Paus. 6.23.1–4; Crowther 1991).

Before each games, heralds (*spondophoroi*) from Elis spread throughout the Greek world announcing the upcoming games, inviting athletes, spectators, and missions of envoys from Greek states, and proclaiming the so-called “sacred truce” (*ekecheiria*). This truce or armistice was not a general or common peace (*eirene*); it may have prohibited disruptions of Olympia by wars, but it was primarily a “hands off” for visitors to the games. It forbade the entry of armies into Elean territory and ordered safe passage through any state for travelers to and from the games, in effect as religious pilgrims. The truce assisted the success of the games, but it has been overly idealized in modern times (see below page 124).

After the preparations at Elis, a large procession of perhaps several hundred people embarked for Olympia. Before they left the Eleans reminded athletes of their responsibility and offered them a chance to withdraw (Philostr. VA 5.43; Miller 2012, no. 84): “If you have worked so as to be worthy of going to Olympia, if you have done nothing indolent nor ignoble, then take heart and march on; but those who have not so trained may leave and go wherever they like.” The procession of officials, athletes, trainers, gift-bearing sacred delegations (*theoriai*) of state representatives, and spectators stopped overnight en route, and the officials purified themselves at the spring of Pieria as they approached the sanctuary. With perhaps 100,000 in attendance at Olympia, the atmosphere was comparable to any major Greek festival, a Roman spectacle, the fairs of later Europe, or even modern sporting spectacles.

At Olympia, athletes swore sacred oaths in the Bouleuterion (Council House) before the statue of Zeus Horkios (of oaths). When the oath was instituted and its original contents remain uncertain. The earliest source, Pausanias (5.24.9–10) says that the athletes, along with their fathers, brothers, and trainers, swore that they would “do nothing evil” against the games. Athletes in the men’s class also swore that they had been training responsibly for ten months. The *Hellanodikai* who judged the ages of boys and horses took an oath to judge fairly, accept no gifts, and keep secret any information about the

competitors. As they controlled the preparations and decorum of athletes, trainers, and spectators, the judges were assisted by whip-scourgers (*mastigophoroi*), rod-bearers (*rabdouchoi*), security police or crowd monitors (*alytarches*, *alytai*), cooks, heralds, and slaves. Three judges ran the equestrian events, three ran the footraces, and the rest ran the combat events. They paired opponents and assigned lanes or byes by lots, thus allowing for divine justice or favor, and they identified victors and awarded them crowns. Conspicuous with their purple robes and forked sticks, the judges could expel, fine, or scourge athletes for cheating or lying.⁸ Appeals to the Olympic Council were possible, and biased judges might be fined (e.g., Paus. 6.3.7), but the judges' orders and decisions were absolute and irrevocable. On occasion, then as now, athletes and judges fell short of the ethical standards their oaths were meant to uphold.

The judges sorted athletes (and horses) by age because, from 632 on, there were contests for boys (*paides*), who perhaps were 12–17 (Crowther 1988; cf. Miller 2004, 10), as well as adults (*andres*). Pausanias (5.8.9) does not explain why. M. Golden (1998, 104–16, 139, 177) suggests that the age differentiation was created to help Elis get more wins, or because fathers were afraid of losing to their sons, but probably the boys' events were added simply to expand participation and attendance. Men's events were probably dominated by single men in their 20s or early 30s. Fathers accompanied boy entrants for security, and because fathers, then as now, competed vicariously through their sons. For a few crowns more, boys' events brought more males to Olympia.

Prize wreaths and nudity

Olympia's prizes probably always were simple wreaths of olive leaves. At the original sacrifices in the sanctuary, all worshippers may have worn crowns, like worshippers and revelers elsewhere. When footraces were added, special crowns, prepared ceremonially under priestly supervision, became tokens marking splendid, divinely favored performers. Herakles supposedly brought the olive to Olympia from the land of the Hyperboreans (Pind. *Ol.* 3.14–16), and a boy whose parents were still living used a golden sickle to cut the twigs for the wreaths from the sacred olive tree in the Altis (Paus. 5.15.3; Schol. Pind. *Ol.* 3.60). The contests thus gained cultic features, including honorific costumes or decorations of sacrifice and celebration. Like the custom of the *phyllobolia*, in which spectators unofficially showered victors with foliage and fruit, the prize giving used natural goods, things at hand, and added special meaning. Victors also received fillets (ribbons of colored wool) and (by Hellenistic times) palm fronds, their names were announced, and they were allowed a victory lap; but they never received money or valuable material prizes at Olympia itself (Kyle 1996, 111–14; Kefalidou 1999).

According to Herodotus (8.26.3), in 480 when Arcadian deserters were questioned before Xerxes about the Olympic games, a Persian noble was

amazed that Olympia awarded only wreaths and that the Greeks competed “not for material reward but for honor (*arete*).” Olympic victory, however, ultimately brought more than a wreath. On their homecoming, Panhellenic victors received additional rewards and honors (see [Chapter 10](#)) including cash bonuses, free meals, and a victory parade (*eiselasis*). When Exainetos won his second Olympic *stadion* victory in 412, the people of Akragas in Sicily welcomed him home with a procession of 300 chariots, each pulled by two white horses, and he entered the city through a hole made in the city walls for him (Diod. Sic. 12.82, 13.34, 13.82). An Olympic wreath was worth a very great deal to the winner, his family, and his state.

Once the custom was introduced, officials also enforced mandatory athletic nudity. Only chariot drivers and jockeys could be clothed. All competitors in the stadium were nude—no jockstrap, no shoes, no place for endorsements—just a thin coat of olive oil.⁹ As noted ([Chapter 4](#)), the absence of a costume was itself a costume during the contests, and athletes remained nude for the awarding of prizes. As well as the fillets and foliage given to victors, crowns functioned as signifiers, decorations, or labels communicating which nude males were victors (Luc. *Anach.* 10).

Eligibility

Multinational but not multicultural, the Olympic Games were for Greek males (men and boys) and only Greek males—not for females, foreigners, or slaves. The judges were to ensure that all entrants for boys’ events were members of a Greek state, belonged to a tribe, had a father and a family, and were free and not illegitimate (Philostr. *Gym.* 25; Crowther 1996; Nielsen 2007, 18–21). Although slaves (or hirelings) played key roles as chariot and mule-cart drivers and jockeys for the wealthy citizens who entered equestrian events (Nicholson 2005, 25–118), slaves were not allowed to enter on their own or to win for themselves. Slaves carried goods and accompanied their owners en route to Olympia (Xen. *Mem.* 3.13.5–6), and apparently slaves feared being sent to Olympia as a punishment because of the heat of the sun at the games (Ael. *VH* 14.18). At Olympia, as at any gymnasium, slaves were almost invisible as mere parts of the equipment and operation of athletics (Crowther 1992b). Classical Olympia upheld its oily trinity of free, Greek, and male, but in time Macedonians, Alexandrians, and others tested and expanded the limits of Greekness and eligibility.

The Program of Contests

The exact sequence of activities at Olympia remains uncertain, and there were changes over time, including a reorganization in 472 (Paus. 5.9.3); but by the mid-fifth century, contests and rituals were intermingled over a five-day festival (Lee 2001). The first day probably saw the oath ceremony, boys’

events, prayers, and sacrifices. Day two saw a procession of competitors and contests in the equestrian events, then the pentathlon, and finally the sacrifice of a black ram to Pelops at night. Day three (that of the full moon, at the middle of the festival) brought central rituals: a procession of judges, ambassadors, and athletes, the main sacrifice (of 100 oxen) to Zeus at noon, footraces, and a public feast. Day four brought the combat events and the hoplite race. Day five perhaps saw a procession and crowning of victors, as well as feasting and celebration. The program itself shows that contests were supplements added to the festival over time. An athletic program did not wrap itself in religion, but rather an early festival expanded to include games.

Details about the earliest Olympiads are now distrusted (see [Chapter 5](#)). Tradition held that for fifty years after 776 the earliest games had only the *stadion* (a sprint race), but that the program then expanded before settling down to a fairly stable list of events by the late sixth century. Pausanias (5.8.5–9.2) suggests more events were introduced as indicated in [Table 6.1](#). By 720, there were three footraces, with a race in armor added in 520. By 688, Olympia had a pentathlon and two combat events (boxing and wrestling), with the *pankration* added by 648. In 680, the four-horse chariot race was a major addition, followed by a horseback race in 648. Four events for boys were added between 632 and 616, but the boys’ pentathlon was discontinued. Two more equestrian events (a mule-cart race and a dismounting race with mares) were added in 500 and 496, respectively, but both were dropped by 444. A two-horse chariot was added in 408, and three events for colts were added later (384–256). In 396, contests for heralds and trumpeters were added to assist the operation of the games and enhance the spectacle (Crowther 1994). Finally, in 200 BCE, a boys’ *pankration*, known elsewhere earlier, was the last event added to the program. Except for Nero’s visit (see [Chapter 15](#)), the program never formally included musical, dramatic, or artistic contests.¹⁰

Table 6.1 The development of the program of contests at Olympia.

<i>Year</i>	<i>Event</i>
776	<i>Stadion</i> (sprint of 200 m)
724	<i>Diaulos</i> (double race of 400 m, down and back)
720	<i>Dolichos</i> (long race of perhaps 20–24 laps)
708	Pentathlon and wrestling (<i>pale</i>)
688	Boxing (<i>pyx</i>)
680	<i>Tethrippon</i> (four-horse chariot of 12 laps)
648	<i>Pankration</i> (all-in wrestling) and <i>keles</i> (horseback race of perhaps six laps)
632	Boys’ <i>stadion</i>
632	Boys’ wrestling

628	Boys' pentathlon (dropped immediately thereafter)
616	Boys' boxing
520	<i>Hoplites</i> or <i>hoplitodromos</i> (race in armor, two lengths)
500	<i>Apene</i> (mule-cart race)
496	<i>Kalpe</i> or <i>anabates</i> (a dismounting race with mares)
444	<i>Kalpe</i> and <i>apene</i> (dropped)
408	<i>Synoris</i> (two-horse chariot race of eight laps)
396	Contests for heralds and trumpeters
384	Four-colt (<i>poloi</i>) chariot race
264	Two-colt chariot race
256	<i>Keles</i> for colts
200	Boys' <i>pankration</i>

With speed, skill, suspense, violence, and danger, Olympia’s athletic and equestrian events were spectacular. The following survey of the contests does not go into great detail on origins, techniques, rules, and records, but it does elaborate upon the pentathlon, which is often invoked as a connection with the Modern Olympics.

Footraces

Plutarch (*Mor.* 640q) saw footraces as essentially a matter of fleeing or pursuing, and running surely was one of the simplest and oldest athletic contests. The *stadion*, a sprint race of *c.* 192 m (600 Greek feet) (see [Figure 6.3](#)), was said to be the first and only Olympic event in 776, and Olympiads were named after the *stadion* victors. For decades, one race may have sufficed as an addition to the festival, but other footraces were introduced as the gathering grew: the *diaulos* or “double-flute” race of two lengths, down and back, in 724, and the *dolichos* or long race of perhaps 20 or 24 lengths (*c.* 7.5–9 km) in 720. Using straight, not oval, tracks, runners in races longer than the sprint had to turn around a wooden post or posts. Scholars have clarified matters of lanes and turn posts, as well as starting procedures and mechanisms.¹¹

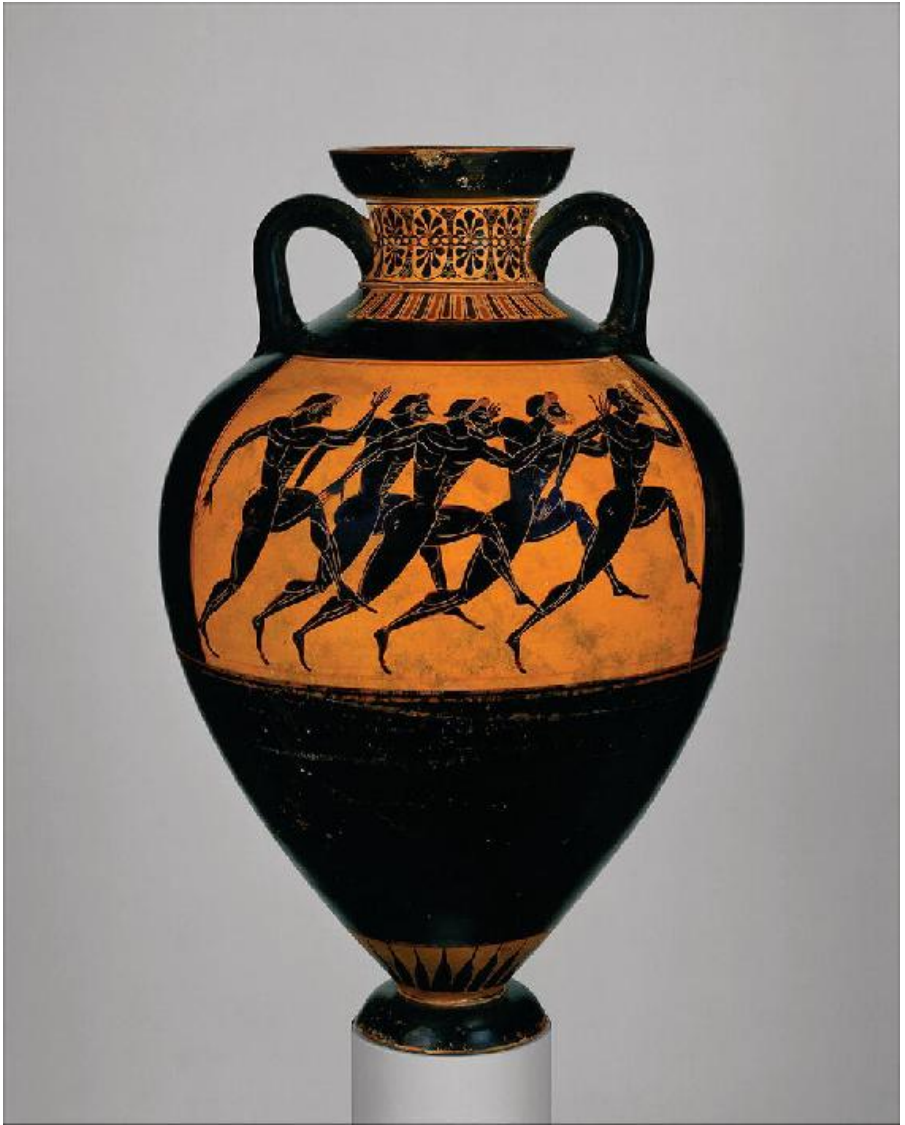


Figure 6.3 Men's stadion race, c. 530 BCE, reverse. Euphiletos Painter. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1914. Inv.14.130.12.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence.

Olympia did not adopt a hoplite race in armor (*hoplitodromos*, *hoplites*, two lengths of the track) until 520, and its obvious military overtones led Pausanias (5.8.10) to suppose that it was meant to provide military training. With helmet, shield, and sometimes greaves at first, the event may recall an old tie between athletics and warfare, or it may reflect changes in hoplite warfare to develop greater flexibility and mobility in anticipation of fighting light-armed infantry (i.e., Persians).¹² Philostratus (*Gym.* 7) speculates that the race, the final event, signaled the end of the truce and the return to a state

of potential war.

Pentathlon

Debate continues about the origin, status, operation, and scoring of the pentathlon and about the techniques of its five sub-events: broad jump, discus, javelin, running, and wrestling (see [Figure 6.4](#)).¹³ Running and wrestling existed independently as events, but the jump, discus, and javelin were held at Olympia only as part of the pentathlon. Ancient authors (e.g., Philostr. *Gym.* 3) speculated about the pentathlon's origins, but Olympia probably held this composite event to test excellence in the discus, jump, and javelin. Running and wrestling perhaps were added to fill out the contest and to help determine an overall victor. Greeks disagreed on the prestige of the pentathlon; pentathletes were splendid athletes with handsome bodies adapted for strength and speed (Arist. *Rhet.* 1361b), but they were generally regarded as less-talented wrestlers and runners than specialists in those events.

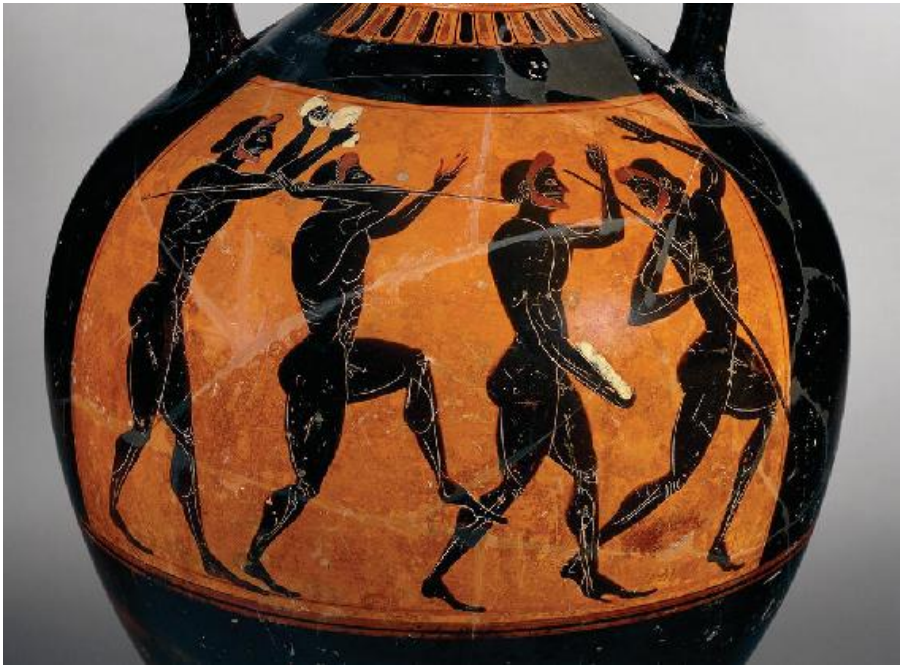


Figure 6.4 Black-figure Panathenaic amphora, showing four athletes, attributed to Euphiletos Painter, painted incised pottery, c. 530–520 BCE.

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Discussion of the technique of the discus throw continues, in part fostered by Myron's fifth-century BCE sculpture of a discus-thrower. Rather than a full rotation like the modern "free throw," the ancient throw was probably an underhand pitch of the right arm as the left leg was advanced forward. Discuses in metal (usually bronze, for use) or stone (for dedication) varied in

size and weight (17–35 cm and 1.5–6.5 kg, averaging 2.5 kg). Three were kept in the Treasury of the Sikyonians for official competition (Paus. 6.19.4).

In the javelin contest, athletes used light elderwood javelins. A leather thong, held by the fingers and wrapped around the middle of the javelin but not fastened to it, imparted a rifling effect to improve distance and accuracy.

In the jump, athletes used metal or stone jumping weights (*halteres*, shaped rather like dumbbells and varying in size and weight from 1.4 to 4.5 kg) to improve distances. The jumper swung the weights forward after the takeoff to aid his momentum, then thrust them backwards for added distance, dropping them before they became a hindrance (cf. Mouratidis 2012, 103–8). Vase paintings depict jumpers running up to the starting sill, so it was a running and not a standing broad jump.

The long debate about scoring and deciding the victor in the pentathlon includes suggestions of points systems, comparative victories or relative placements, systems of elimination, byes, lots, and rematches.¹⁴ Moderns assume that such technical matters must have been precise and consistent, but Greek sport was not perfectly standardized. We know that as soon as one athlete had three wins he was declared the victor and the competition ended, so the three nonindependent sub-events probably took place first. Xenophon (*Hell.* 7.4.29) says that wrestling was the final event, so the run probably was held fourth.

H. Harris supports an elimination system, in which only first places counted. After the jump, discus, and javelin, any winner of all those three events was declared the overall victor. If not (Harris 1972, 34–5),

... there were either three competitors, A, B and C, with one win each, or one, A, with two wins and another, B, with one. In the latter case, these two ran a 200-yard race. If A won, he now had three wins and was the victor. If B won the race, A and B now had two each and they wrestled to decide the champion. If after the triad there were three athletes with one win each, these three ran the race. One of them, A, now had two wins, while B and C still had one each. B and C now wrestled in a semi-final; in virtue of his two wins, A was given a bye He then wrestled with the winner of the semi-final, who now also had two wins, and the winner of this bout was the victor in the whole event.

Disagreement continues about possible systems of relative placements with or without eliminations, about whether eliminations took place after the third or fourth event, and about whether wrestling, the run, or some event drawn by lot was used, when necessary, to narrow the field to two competitors for the wrestling match. There were only three judges to handle multiple sub-events, throws, and jumps, to handle the entrants, to retain the audience's interest and trust; and to pick a clear winner—all in an afternoon.

Adapting Harris and taking the context and logistics into consideration, I (Kyle 1990) assume elimination of all nonwinners after the first three sub-events, and then, if a semifinal elimination round was needed (to reduce the field for the final two men wrestling), I suggest an added run, not a taxing wrestling match, so that the final wrestling would be more competitive. Lee (1995) proposes a hybrid system with some elimination and then a system of relative placements; and Egan (2007) returns to and emends the late text of Philostratus. Whatever the system(s), the Olympic pentathlon was an efficient, intelligible, and entertaining contest for a mass audience.

Combat sports

The Greeks probably called wrestling, boxing, and the *pankration* “heavy events” (*barea athla*) because, without modern weight classes, rounds, or time limits, heavier athletes tended to dominate. In uneven fields, a combat athlete might be allotted a bye and sit out as an *ephedros*, gaining an advantage in the next round (Poliakoff 1987, 21–2; Crowther 1992a). Fouls, clinching to stall a fight, or indications of lethargy were met with efficacious blows of the judge’s stick.

The violence of Greek combat sports may shock moderns, but, like Rome, Greece was a warrior society, and soldiers had to be tough. We hear of deaths and even posthumous victories at Olympia.¹⁵ In 564 BCE, while expiring in a strangle hold, the pankratiast Arrachion of Phigaleia reportedly dislocated his opponent’s ankle, forcing him to submit to a dead but victorious man (Paus. 8.40.1–2, Philostr. *Imag.* 2.6). States even upheld the legal immunity of athletes who accidentally killed their opponents (Dem. 23.53).

Wrestling (*pale*) involved an array of holds and throws, and matches were decided by three out of five falls or by submission. Aristophanes (*Eq.* 490–1) suggests that an unethical wrestler would oil his neck to make neck holds difficult, and his chorus (*Eq.* 571–3) praises the fighting spirit of earlier Athenians who, when they fell to their shoulders, wiped off the dust (which would indicate a fall), denied that they had been thrown, and continued to wrestle. According to an inscribed sacred law (*SEG* 48.541) of c. 525–500 from the Altis, finger breaking was not allowed and was punishable by flogging—except to the head; but apparently the rules changed later, for the wrestler Leontiskos of Messene won by bending his opponents’ fingers.¹⁶

Without weight classes or rounds, and with most blows directed to the head, Greek boxing (*pux*, *pugme*) was spectacularly brutal. Greek art depicts bleeding and disfigured boxers, with scars, cauliflower ears, and broken noses (see [Figure 6.5](#)). A mid-fourth-century head of the boxer Satyros by Silanion, found at Olympia, shows his flat nose and cauliflower ears. Early boxers wrapped their hands and wrists (but not their upper fingers) with long, thin ox-hide leather straps, so-called soft thongs (*himantes meilichai*), to protect their

hands—not to spare their opponent’s face. In the later fourth century, a longer glove appeared with sharper thongs (*himantes oxeis*) and an added ridge of larger, thicker leather across the back of the hand and knuckles. The glove continued to change, with wool padding for the forearm, and many suggest the later Roman era version of the glove (*caestus*) was studded with metal.¹⁷

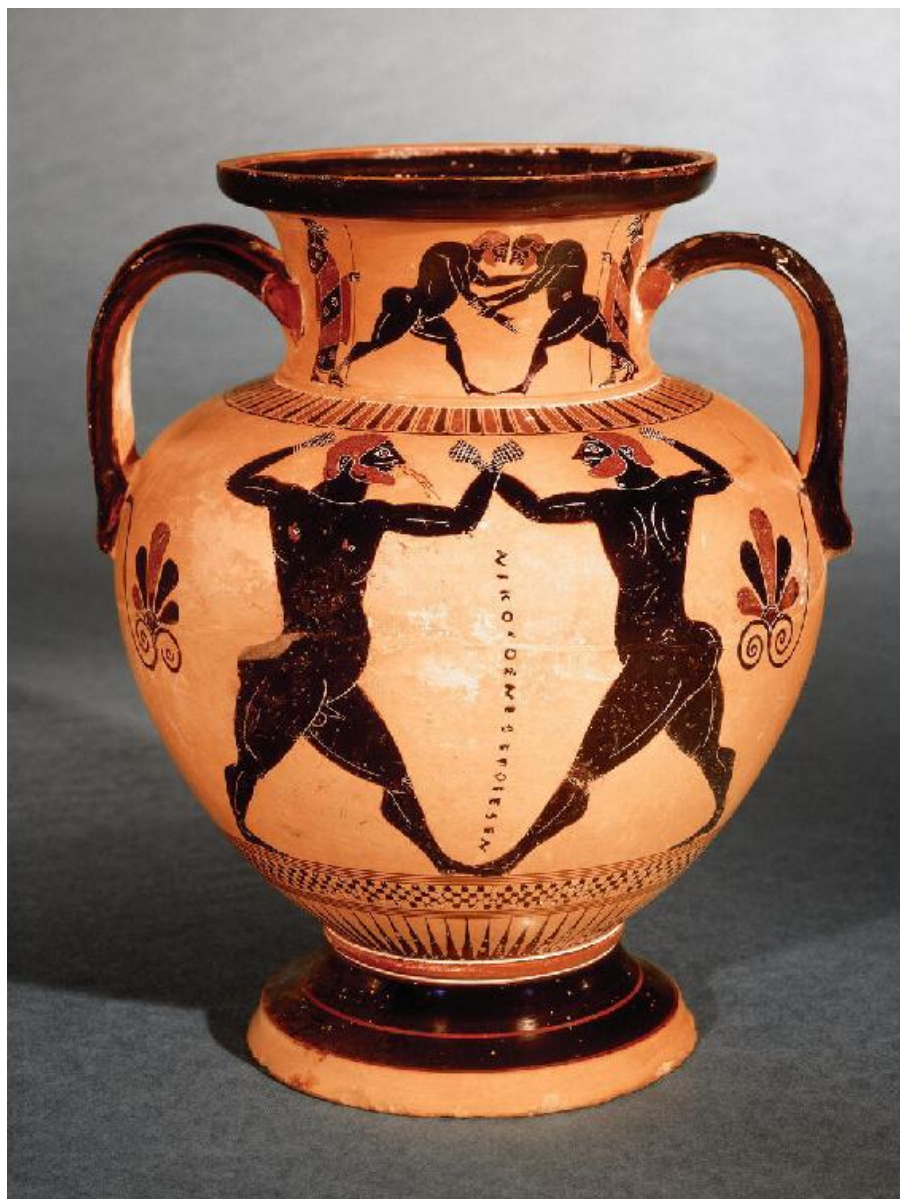


Figure 6.5 Boxing and wrestling, amphora made by Nikosthenes, painted incised pottery, c. 550–540 BCE.

Pairs of boxers fought until one was knocked out or admitted defeat by raising his index finger. A ladder-like barrier (*klimax*) was used to define the ring and to return the fighters to a center. Eurydamas of Cyrene supposedly had his teeth knocked out but swallowed them so his opponent would not notice, and he went on to win (Ael. *VH* 10.19). Aristophanes (*Lys.* 614–705) compares an argument between old men and women to a boxing match, and the women threaten to disfigure the men so badly that their own mothers could not recognize them. In the first century CE, Lucillius wrote satirical epigrams (11.75–7; Sweet 1987, 258–62) claiming that boxers became so disfigured that they could not claim inheritances and even their dogs did not know them.

A third heavy event, the *pankration* or “all powerful” combat was a brutal free-for-all combining wrestling, boxing, and kicking. A match ended only when one athlete capitulated or was incapacitated. Light boxing thongs might be used in art, and the event is sometimes difficult to distinguish from boxing or wrestling. There were few rules: gouging and biting were prohibited and brought blows from the judge (see [Figure 6.6](#)), but punching, kicking, choking, and blows to the genitals were not (Poliakoff 1987, 54–63; Miller 2004, 57–60). A thrice-victorious mid-fourth-century Olympic pankratiast, Sostratos of Sikyon was famous for bending and breaking the fingers of opponents (Paus. 6.4.1–3).



Figure 6.6 Scene of boxers and pankratiasts, c. 500–475 BCE.

The Greeks admired combat athletes for their toughness, endurance, and fighting spirit, all virtues in a warrior society in which children grew up with Homeric stories of fighting and death. As noted in [Chapter 5](#), Theocritus (*Id.* 22.80–134; Miller 2012, no. 39) recounts a brutal boxing match in which the hero Polydeukes battered the barbarian Amykos until he spat blood, his eyes swelled shut, his forehead was split open to the bone, and his face was pounded into a shapeless, bloody mess. Greek warfare was brutal and not without atrocities, and Greeks saw educational value in animal blood sports. They were especially fond of cockfights, feeling that they inspired military vigor and a determination to fight to the death. Like peoples before and after them, Greeks found orchestrated brutality alluring and spectacular.

Equestrian events

Introduced in 680, the four-horse chariot race (*tethrippon*) was the most expensive, prestigious, and dangerous Greek contest. Perhaps because the event was added from funeral game traditions, charioteers wore tunics or chitons. They goaded their horses on and raced their light chariots for 12 laps over a racetrack with hairpin turns and no central dividing barrier to prevent head-on collisions (see [Figure 6.7](#)). Less threatening but still dangerous, the horse race (*keles*) was perhaps six lengths long (Harris 1972, 151–61; Bell 1989). Youthful jockeys, bareback with no saddle or stirrups but with goads and spurs, are sometimes depicted nude but may not have ridden so. More curious events, a mule-cart race (*apene*) and a dismounting race with mares (*kalpe* or *anabates*), were introduced in 500 and 496, respectively, perhaps under Sicilian influence (see [Figure 12.1a](#)), but they were dropped in 444 (Paus. 5.9.1). The two-horse chariot (*synoris*) was added in 408, and finally, equine age classes were added with four-horse (eight laps, in 384) and two-horse (three laps, in 264) chariot events for foals and a horseback race for foals in 256 (Miller 2004, 75–80). Olympia adjusted somewhat to the more diversified equestrian events held elsewhere, but it remained relatively conservative.

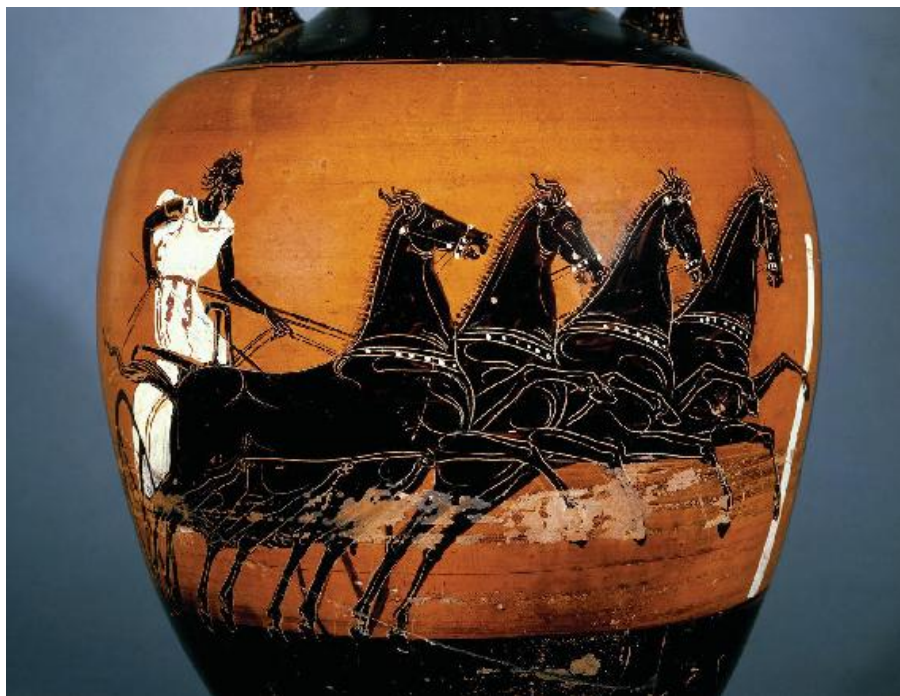


Figure 6.7 Four-horse chariot (*tethrippon*) race. c. 410–400 BCE.

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Aristocrats and tyrants probably suggested adding chariot and horse races to increase opportunities for conspicuous display. Maintaining horses was indisputably and extravagantly expensive, and nobles wanted to shore up their status as a wealthy leisure class. Elis was legendary as a horse-raising area, so the oligarchic Elean overseers of the early games probably welcomed the development. Also, attracting more elite participation from nobles, tyrants, and kings invited flattering dedications and patronage, and notable competitors contributed to the spectacle, albeit usually indirectly.

Pindar praises two owners for actually driving their own chariots “like the heroes of old” (*Isth.* 1.15, *Pyth.* 5.21, 115). However, since owners were declared the winners, and racing was dangerous, most equestrian entrants used hired or slave drivers or jockeys. N. Nicholson (2005, 25–118) argues that aristocrats, anxious about socioeconomic changes in Greece, minimized the contributions of their hired charioteers and jockeys in their victory commemorations (e.g., odes, dedications, and vases). Owners did not even need to be present, thus allowing absentee and even female victors (see [Chapters 9, 12](#)). Even corporate or state entries and multiple entries were allowed. Argos won with state-owned chariots in 480 and 472, and Alcibiades of Athens entered seven teams in 416 (see [Chapter 8](#)). Nevertheless, equestrian victory retained its connotations of aristocratic status.

Olympia and Spectacle: Politics, Problems, and Performances

An Olympic victory was the pinnacle of athletic achievement, and highly trained and passionately motivated experts pursued winning at all costs. Without team events and with only first-place finishes, Olympic competition was about winning and losing, honor and humiliation, the lure of victory and the fear of failure. Epictetus (*Disc.* 3.22.52, trans. Sweet) writes:

In the Olympic Games you cannot just be beaten and then depart, but first of all, you will be disgraced not only before the people of Athens or Sparta or Nikopolis but before the whole world. In the second place, if you withdraw without sufficient reason you will be whipped. And this whipping comes after your training, which involves thirst and boiling heat and swallowing handfuls of sand.

The effort and the pressure were intense, and Olympic athletes were human beings, not marble masterpieces. In 492, when the judges stripped Kleomedes of Astypalaia of his victory in boxing for intentionally killing Ikkos of Epidauros, he lost his mind. Returning home, he attacked a school full of children and pulled down its roof on them, killing the children (Paus. 6.9.6–8).

Spectators came to witness the greatest celebration of their love of athletics and to see wonders of art and architecture. Also, as pilgrims, they could practice their piety with prayers, processions, oaths, sacrifice, and feasting, for the sacrifice of 100 oxen to Zeus brought a lavish public meat feast. Victors, friends, and fans celebrated wins with wine and song, with gratitude and gusto. Olympia, however, offered even more than sport, religion, and conviviality. States sent representatives and individuals attended for diverse reasons, from ambition to curiosity (cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 5.3.9).

The Olympics were a forum or showplace, a media event with peripheral attractions (Weiler 1997; Crowther 2001b, 45–8). Due to reverence for Olympia and the stigma of Roman spectacles, moderns have resisted the idea of the ancient Olympics as a mass spectacle, but all Greco-Roman public sports and entertainments were “spectacles”—public performances to be attended and watched closely by crowds. The very crowds themselves attracted even more people with a variety of motives. Olympia was not immune to bloody violence, impassioned crowds, political exploitation, cheating and corruption, self-display, commercialism, and other features usually associated with Roman spectacles. Aspects of spectacles reviled as Roman have been revealed as routine in Greek athletics.

Peace, politics, and Panhellenism

The modern world, weary of warfare, has wanted to believe that the Greeks declared a common peace, suspended their wars, and gathered together harmoniously at Olympia for the love of sport, but the ancient reality was less than perfect. As noted in [Chapter 5](#), legend says the Delphic oracle instructed Iphitos of Elis to restore the games and establish a truce. Strabo (*Geog.* 8.3.33) romantically suggests that armies passing through Elis gave up their arms and then got them back as they left the territory. It does seem that Olympia operated as an arbitration court for resolving disputes among states for a brief time in the 470s, in the glow of Greece's victory against the Persians (Siewert 1992, 115; Sinn 2000, 54–7). It was, however, the dreadful Peloponnesian War and later internecine wars in the fourth century that moved poets, sophists, and orators to call for Panhellenic peace and unity and to associate such ideas with Olympia and games in general. Philostratus (VS 49) claims that the rhetorician Gorgias in his *Olympic Discourse* of 408 urged the Greeks to fight barbarians instead of each other. The orator Lysias (*Olymp.* 1.33.1–2; cf. Polyb. 12.26.2) said Herakles founded the games to promote Panhellenic harmony and reduce disputes, and Isokrates (*Paneg.* 43, Loeb trans. G. Norlin) in 380 cast his contemporary longing for peace back onto the founding fathers of the Panhellenic Games.

Now the founders of our great festivals are justly praised for handing down to us a custom by which, having proclaimed a truce and resolved our pending quarrels, we come together in one place, where, as we make our prayers and sacrifices in common, we are reminded of the kinship which exists among us and are made to feel more kindly towards each other for the future, reviving our old friendships and establishing new ties.

Such comments are lofty but, historically, Greek Panhellenism was more cultural than political until it was too late (Kyle 2010).

The Olympic truce, a “staying of hands” (*ekecheiria*), initially of one and later three months duration, was enforced only by Zeus' authority and religious sanctions, fines, and exclusions. It promoted but could not guarantee peace and unity—or even safe passage (Lämmer 1982–1983; Golden 2011). The truce did not stop wars among the Greeks, but neither did wars stop their games. Greeks gathered for the Olympics in 480 (Hdt. 8.26.2) even as Xerxes was invading the peninsula, and the games continued throughout the Peloponnesian War. Aristophanes (*Lys.* 1128–34) scolds Greeks for gathering as “brothers” (*syngeneis*) about the altar of Zeus at Olympia and elsewhere but waging war against each other instead of against barbarians. After Rome took over Greece the truce was still declared, but it was Rome's power that effectively deterred problems and imposed peace and unity on Greece.

Ancient Olympia was neither an island of calm nor a haven for pacifism. The fiercely independent city-states challenged each other even there with monuments celebrating victory in war, not just in sport. The seers of the

Olympic oracle were consulted for military advice, and many war trophies (weapons and armor) from local as well as foreign conflicts were dedicated at Olympia. Even Plato (*Resp.* 5.469b–471c) criticized the Greek practice of dedicating armor seized from other Greeks at Panhellenic sanctuaries. Pausanias (5.10.2) suggests that the Temple of Zeus itself was financed by war spoils and celebrated Elis' triumph over Pisa for control of Olympia. Sparta and its allies dedicated a gold shield to decorate the Temple as a tithe for their victory at the Battle of Tanagra in 457 (Paus. 5.10.4). Eleans dedicated the largest bronze statue of Zeus in the Altis, some 8 m high, from spoils in their war with Arcadia (Paus. 5.24.4).

In his study of Olympia (and Delphi) from c. 650–300, M. Scott (2010) clarifies the use of space and the placement of monuments and dedications in strategic locations as part of changes in “spatial politics”—a spatial political discourse among visitors, dedicators, and dedications. For example, the exquisite Nike of Paionios, financed by a tithe on war spoils and dedicated on its high base in 421 near the Temple of Zeus, commemorated the victory of the Naupaktians and Messenians over Sparta at Sphakteria in 425 (Paus. 5.26.1), and other athletic statues and commemorations (e.g., Macedon's Philippeion, see [Chapter 12](#)), had political agendas (Scott 2010, 196–201, 210–12).

Scott also questions the modern terming and characterization of the Archaic and Classical “Panhellenic” sanctuaries as centers of “Panhellenism,” suggesting that the term was introduced in the 130s CE when Hadrian established the Panhellenion or revised circuit of great games.¹⁸ He correctly challenges the image of unity, harmony, and ecumenical participation as ideals but not realities: the sanctuaries knew tensions and heated rivalry that went beyond sport, patterns of dedication and involvement changed with historical circumstances, and participation was never universal.

The Ancient Olympics, like the modern version, struggled with the centrifugal forces of parochial patriotism. Even Olympia was not immune to political interference and exploitation.¹⁹ As early Elis and Pisa contested their claims to the sanctuary, Pheidon of Argos, possibly c. 668, used force to transfer control of Olympia from Elis to Pisa. This was seen as an outrageous and arrogant act (Hdt. 6.127.3; Paus. 6.22.1–4), but it was not the last use of force at Olympia. When Arcadian military forces supporting Pisa took over the sanctuary and staged games in 364 BCE, Eleans and others tried to retake Olympia by force, and there was pitched fighting in the Altis itself (Xen. *Hell.* 7.4.28–32; Crowther 2003b).

Olympia and other sanctuaries had to be supervised by some state or league, and Elis and other states were not above exploiting the games (Crowther 2003a; Nielsen 2007, 29–54). Elis' remote location and its late unification as a city-state sheltered it for years, but fifth-century Olympia was heavily politicized. In 432, the Peloponnesian League apparently considered

appropriating wealth from Olympia and Delphi to gain resources against Athens (Thuc. 1.121.3, 1.143.1). The military treaty between Argos, Athens, Mantinea, and Elis in 420 was inscribed on a bronze pillar at Olympia, Elis fined Sparta in 420 for supposedly invading Elean territory during the truce, and Sparta launched an invasion of Elis c. 402–400 (see [Chapter 9](#)), including attacking Olympia. The corpse of one of the defenders of the Altis was later discovered in the roof of the Temple of Hera (Paus. 5.20.4–5). Yes, Ancient Olympia knew war and politics, but abuses of the Olympics have happened more often in modern times.

Opportunism and corruption

Hustling and gamesmanship are not new in sport. Most ancient Olympians kept their oaths and acted honorably, but some sought advantages and crossed the line. Abuses in Olympic competition were not just a late development (i.e., bad sportsmanship as a harbinger of moral decline) but rather a by-product of the passion for victory. Sixth-century inscriptions, some of the earliest records at Olympia, included prohibitions against fouls in wrestling and rules about the fining of athletes (Siewert 1992, 115). Olympia dealt with *ad hoc* fouls, like gouging in the *pankration*, with flogging (see [Figure 6.6](#)). At Salamis, when Themistocles was told that those who false start at races are flogged, he replied that those who start too slowly do not win (Hdt. 8.59). Greeks resorted to psychological (but not pharmaceutical) enhancements: athletes prayed and made vows, and coaches used motivational ploys (Philostr. *Gym.* 21–3). Lead curse tablets from Athens and other sites show that Greeks tried to hex athletic rivals and make them fail in competitions (Jordan 1985, 214–15).

Nothing in the Olympic oath or rules said athletes had to stay loyal to their homelands. Since they declared which state they represented, athletes could transfer their allegiances. Astylos of Kroton won both the *stadion* and *diaulos* in three Olympics (488–480, with the hoplite race as well in 480). He declared for Kroton first in 488 (and possibly 484) but declared for Syracuse in 480 (and possibly 484), provoking his fellow citizens to pull down his statue and turn his house into a prison (Paus. 6.13.1). When another runner, Sotades of Crete, won for Crete in 384 but then took a bribe and declared for Ephesos in 380, the Cretans punished him with exile (Paus. 6.18.6). Homelands saw transfers as scandalous betrayals, but modern parallels are quite common.

The corruption best known at Olympia was the calculated bribery and fraud attested by the Zanes, bronze statues of Zeus paid for by fines imposed on athletes who “arrogantly (*hubrisasin*)” broke the rules. Pausanias (5.21.2–18) discusses the Zanes and the related infractions at considerable length. At least 16 of the statues flanked the route to the stadium below the terrace of the Treasuries. The first six, from fines on Eupolos of Thessaly and the three boxing opponents who accepted his bribes, were set up in 388 BCE, with the

next additions in 332. Some bore inscriptions warning against bribery, declaring that athletes should win by bodily excellence and not by money (5.21.3–4). The inscriptions recall the Homeric aristocratic antithesis of *kleos* against *kerdos*, contrasting athletes seeking glory with traders seeking profit.

Like the truce, the Zanes depended upon religious authority. When Olympic officials fined the victorious Athenian pentathlete Kallippos in 332 for bribery, Athens protested (Paus. 5.21.5–7). When the orator Hyperides was unable to convince them to lift the fine, the displeased Athenians boycotted the Olympics; but when Delphi refused them oracles until they paid, Athens paid the fine and six statues were set up. The inscriptions on these Zanes said that the oracle approved of the fines and applauded Elis for its action, and, again, that competition at Olympia was a matter “of excellence and not of wealth.” Rather than as proof of moral decline, we should see the Zanes as a clever innovation, a public, enduring form of deterrence for predictable problems. Like victory statues and epigrams, these statutory warnings denouncing vice added to the sights at Olympia.

The involvement of Eleans as both officials and competitors, as both spectators and interested parties, was inherently problematic. Herodotus (2.160) says an Elean embassy to Egypt c. 590 was advised by the Egyptians that Eleans should not be allowed to compete at Olympia, but that advice was ignored. Miller (2004, 19, 232–3) suggests that “there was no subjective judging” and Olympic winners were chosen “by obvious, objective standards,” but the human element in judging competitions cannot be infallible. Even with space age technology, our Olympics are hardly free of judging controversies, so it should not surprise us that some ancient judges ignored conflicts of interest.

In 396 BCE, two of the three *Hellandikai* credited the *stadion* victory to their countryman, Eupolemos, while the third chose Leon of Ambrakia (Paus. 6.3.7). When Leon appealed to the Olympic Council, the judges who gave the win to Eupolemos were fined, but his win stood (Crowther 1997).²⁰ In another egregious incident, in 372, the judges crowned a judge: Troilos of Elis, while a judge, entered and won the four-colt and two-horse chariot races (Paus. 6.1.4–5). After this, it was declared that no Elean could be both a judge and a competitor in an equestrian event. Despite a few lapses, the judges generally succeeded in providing a high level of consistency and objectivity. Training regulations, oaths, attentive judges, and the sacral context of the festival assured that the Olympics were worth the trouble spectators took to attend them.

Spectators, commercialism, and self-display

The logistical demands of hosting the modern games have prompted questions about arrangements for spectators at Olympia. If the stadium held 40,000, the

total attendance was perhaps twice that or more, and the facilities were inadequate by modern—or Roman—standards.²¹ The city of Elis had extensive training facilities, but Olympia itself had no modern-style “Olympic village” for athletes, nor adequate facilities for spectators. Permanent buildings (e.g., hostels and banquet pavilions) and sanitation facilities for visitors were not constructed until the fourth century (Sinn 2000, 83–90). Around 320 BCE, a patron from Naxos provided the Leonidaion, now a prominent ruin southwest of the sanctuary, as a guesthouse or hotel, but only for athletes or a few (perhaps 50–100) dignitaries.

Delegations, tyrants, and the ultrarich might erect temporary pavilions and offer hospitality to celebrate victories or simply for self-promotion.²² Plato (*Leg.* 950e–951a) suggested that the ideal state should send impressive delegations to the Panhellenic games to spread the fame of their state at the “assemblies of piety and peace.” Along with lavish sacrifices and rhapsodes, the embassy of Dionysios I of Syracuse in 388 BCE had large tents decorated with expensive, colorful cloth (Diod. Sic. 14.109).

Conventional propriety was expected at or near the Altis, but the atmosphere was probably less reverent and more ribald at greater distances away from the sanctuary. One imagines a makeshift, sporting Woodstock in the area south of the sanctuary in the crook of the Alpheios and Kladeos rivers. People camped out as best they could, shantytowns probably arose along routes to the sanctuary, and congestion slowed the departure of visitors after the games (*Luc. de mort. Peregr.* 35).

Sources complain about the heat, noise, crowds, theft, water shortage, inadequate accommodations, and poor sanitation. Lucian (*Her.* 8; Miller 2012, no. 43) mentions Olympia’s “cramped quarters, its tents and shanties, and its stifling heat.” The unsanitary conditions and the great sacrifice attracted flies, causing officials to make a sacrifice to Zeus as the “Averter of Flies” (Paus. 5.14.1). Epictetus (1.6.26–7, Miller 2012, no. 146) uses visiting Olympia as an example of man’s ability to endure hardships:

There are unpleasant and difficult things in life. But don’t they happen at Olympia? Don’t you suffer from the heat? Aren’t you cramped for space? Don’t you bathe badly? Don’t you get soaked by rains? Don’t you get your fill of noise and shouting and other annoyances? But I suspect that you compare all this to the value of the show (*pros to axiologon tes theas*) and endure it?

Tolerating inconveniences, crowds of spectators still came for “the show.”

Moderns did not invent the commercialization of Olympic sport. If crowds gather at any games, other people will show up to sell them goods or services or to perform for them. Ancient Olympia attracted vendors of votives, victuals, and victory odes. Poets, including Pindar, and artists, including the

sculptors Myron and Apelles, sought commissions at Olympia. The painter Aëtion displayed his painting, “Marriage of Roxane and Alexander,” there (Luc. *Her.* 1.4). Sophists (teachers of philosophy and rhetoric) also displayed their talents (Kokolakis 1992); Hippias of Elis often attended and gave performances of his skills (Pl. *Hi. mi.* 363c and d).

As Tertullian (*De spect.* 25) wrote of crowds at Roman events, people went to Olympia “to see and to be seen.” Olympia was *the* place to be seen, to make a name for yourself. The mid-fifth-century astronomer Oenopides of Chios dedicated at Olympia a tablet inscribed with the movements of the stars over 59 years (Ael. *VH* 10.7). Herodotus read aloud from his *Histories* at the Temple of Zeus to expose his work to a large crowd (Luc. *Herod.* 1–4). Plato perhaps went to the games and shared a humble structure with strangers without revealing his identity (Ael. *VH* 4.9), but others welcomed recognition. Themistocles relished the applause marking his prominent appearance in the Olympic stadium after the Battle of Salamis (480), and the crowd approved of his public criticism of Hiero, tyrant of Syracuse, for staying out of the Persian War (Plut. *Them.* 17.2, 25.1; Ael. *VH* 9.5, 13.43). Hiero won the chariot race in 476; but, despite all their success and hospitality, despite sending chariots, hiring poets, and issuing coins publicizing their wins (see [Figure 12.1a](#)), the fifth- and fourth-century tyrants of Sicily were not popular favorites at Olympia.

There was more going on at the Ancient Olympics than sport, but sport remained the center of attention and the best reason to attend. People came because there was something special and memorable about “being there,” about being at least a small part of that great phenomenon. Despite some corruption and criticism, the Ancient Olympics were a tremendous success over their long history. Olympia owed some of its success to aristocratic display, equestrian events, interstate competition, professionalism (i.e., specialization and state rewards), and the spectacular allure of violence and nudity; but much of that success can be credited to the efforts of the organizers, the dedication of the athletes, and the ideals of Olympic competition. On balance, the Olympics remained a celebration of human effort and achievement, a matter of inspiration and ideals, for which the modern world should be grateful.

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Notes

- 1 For various works on Olympia, see References and n. 1 in Chapter 5. Crowther (2004) includes several valuable articles on the Olympic Games. Also see Potter (2012) 37–106.
- 2 Overviews include Kyrieleis (2003); Valavanis (2004, 52–143); Kyrieleis (2011).
- 3 See Miller (2004, 94) and fig. 174; (2001, 190–210) on the changing room, and 70, nn. 145–6 on the entrance tunnel at Olympia. On the start, see Valavanis (1999, 57–61).
- 4 Ebert (1989) suggests the racecourse itself was 1052×64 m and the starting gates spanned the full width of the track.
- 5 On the forms, rituals, and symbols, as well as the social and political dimensions, of Greek and Roman festivals, now see Brandt and Iddeng (2012).
- 6 Scanlon (2002, 25–39); cf. Golden (1998, 14–23); Murray (2014).
- 7 Crowther (2003a); Miller (2004, 113–8); Nielsen (2007, 29–54).
- 8 Crowther (2000, 2001a); Crowther and Frass (1998, 65–8).
- 9 On the use of oil, see Chapter 4. n. 21.
- 10 See, for example, Poliakoff (1987, 23–63, 68–88); and essays in Crowther (2004); Miller (2004, 31–86); Spivey (2012, 71–128); Young (2004, 24–51); Potter (2012, 67–88).
- 11 Harris (1960); Miller (1980); Valavanis (1999).
- 12 Snodgrass (1980, 152–3); Sekunda and Hook (2000, 6–7).
- 13 For example, Kyle (1990); Young (2004, 161–4); Egan (2007); Mouratidis (2010, 2012).
- 14 For example, Sweet (1987, 56–9); Kyle (1990); Lee (1995); Egan (2007).
- 15 Poliakoff (1987, 62–3, 91); Scanlon (2002, 304–7).

- 16 Poliakoff (1987, 23–53); Miller (2004, 46–50); Siewert (1992, 114–16).
- 17 Poliakoff (1987, 68–88); Scanlon (1982–1983, 31–45). On the *caestus*, see Chapter 15.
- 18 Scott (2010, 250–72); but cf. Purcell’s (2012) cautionary comments. Scott also challenges the modern categorization of sites as urban, extra-urban, etc. by noting the fluidity or “spatial indeterminacy” of sporting activities (e.g., in public or non-athletic locations and facilities; multiple uses of sporting facilities).
- 19 Hönle (1968); Miller (2004, 216–25); Spivey (2012, 174–210).
- 20 Miller (2004, 109–10), from Lucian (*Hermot.* 39), suggests Elean spectators clustered about the judges’ stand. He also notes (2001, 233–4), that distributions of coins in the stadium at Nemea suggest ethnic cheering sections.
- 21 Crowther (2001b); Sinn (2000, 76–90).
- 22 Gribble (2012) says Alcibiades shows that Olympia was (71) “a showcase for the agonistic display of political imagery by the competing Greek cities” via feasts, spending, dedications, monuments, speeches, victories, processions, pavilions, and horses.

7

Panhellenic Sacred Crown Games and More

Anacharsis:

What are these prizes for which you compete?

Solon:

A crown of olive at Olympia, a crown of pine at Isthmia, a crown of wild celery at Nemea, the laurel-berries sacred to Apollo at Delphi, and the oil of the olive at the Panathenaia.

Lucian, *Anacharsis* 9, trans. Miller 2012, no. 113.

The success of games at Olympia inspired other similar games in festivals at interstate sanctuaries at Delphi, Isthmia, and Nemea. Later known as the *periodos* or circuit, all four games had wreath prizes, truces, and contests open to all Greeks, but each had its own distinctive features and identity.¹ The earliest and latest games, at Olympia and Nemea, both to Zeus, were most alike in their athletic programs because the games at Nemea were an artificial creation consciously modeled on Olympia. The festivals at Delphi and Isthmia, to Apollo and Poseidon, respectively, had elaborate programs that shared some elements not only with Olympia but also with each other.

The quadrennial Olympics had primacy of place, and the other three games were carefully arranged around them (Miller 2004a, 111–12). To avoid conflict or affront to Olympia, the other games, with the Pythian on a four-year cycle and the Isthmian and Nemean games on two-year cycles, were held in a set sequence, with at least one of the great festivals each year, leading up to the Olympics as the finale. A four-year cycle included six festivals: one Olympian and one Pythian, as well as two each of Isthmian and Nemean games. Careful scheduling and cooperation among the games, nevertheless, did not prevent tension and rivalry.

Pythian Games

The second greatest crown games took place as part of the Pythian festival to Apollo at Delphi, every four years, in the middle of each Olympiad.² As at Olympia, the strategic location at an interstate sanctuary of a major god aided the prestige and success of the games. The site on the slope of Mt. Parnassus

in Phocis, c. 2000 feet above the Gulf of Corinth, seems an illogical place for games, but it was an intensely evocative setting for pagan spirituality. In fact, before its athletic contests achieved fame, Delphi was known throughout the Greek world as the home of an oracle of Apollo, which surpassed the oracle of Zeus at Olympia. Homer omits Olympia but mentions the wealth of Apollo at Delphi (*Il.* 404–5), and Homer’s Agamemnon consulted the oracle before the Trojan War (*Od.* 8.79–81). Again, cult preceded competition.

Unlike Olympia, Isthmia, and Nemea, the foundation legend (*aition*) for the festival at Delphi was not associated with hero cult. Rather, according to myth (e.g., Hyg. *Fab.* 140), Apollo established musical contests after killing the great serpent Pytho. Archaeology indicates that a cult of Apollo Pythios started c. 1000–800 and that there was an early village from c. 860 on, with increasing dedications by c. 800 and through the eighth century.³ Nearby Krisa probably organized early musical competitions with material prizes at eighth-century Pythian festivals at Delphi. These contests became stephanitic only in the sixth century.

Apollo’s famous oracle was functioning by the late eighth century, well before any Pythian athletic program. In historical times, a prophetess or Pythia sitting on a tripod in the Temple of Apollo, perhaps inhaling psychedelic natural gasses from a fissure, entered a trance and made garbled utterances. Herodotus’ tales of cryptic oracles, fatefully misinterpreted by hubristic figures but ultimately fulfilled, may not reliably record the oracular responses that priests interpreted from the Pythia’s messages. Some feel the oracles were ambiguous and unclear, but others feel they just reinforced the announced intentions of the consulters.⁴

The Program of contests

Delphi emerged as a city-state c. 590 but soon became the object of the so-called First Sacred War. Taking control of Delphi, the tyrant Kleisthenes of Sikyon and various states placed the oracle under the direction of a Delphic League or Amphictyony with representatives from Thessaly and central Greece. In 586, Delphi adopted, or more likely was given, a suddenly expanded program of contests consciously but not completely modeled on Olympia. Apparently, the oldest competition and earliest prizes were for kithara (lyre) singing, but in 586 athletic events similar to Olympia, as well as flute contests (singing and playing), were added (Paus. 10.7.2–7), as were material prizes: probably golden tripods, spoils from the Sacred War. As at Olympia, Delphi adopted the three footraces and the pentathlon for men, but it also held the same three races and a pentathlon for boys. Olympia still had only a boys’ *stadion*, and it had introduced but immediately dropped the boys’ pentathlon in 628. Delphi followed Olympia in offering men’s contests in the three combat events, but it held only boxing for boys—not both boxing and wrestling for boys as at Olympia. Given the location, there was only one

equestrian event, the *keles*, which probably was held below the sanctuary on the plain of Krisa. Overnight as it were, Delphi in 586 began offering 16 contests, more than Olympia's 13, as if the organizers wanted to establish an athletic reputation for Delphi rather quickly.

At the second (reorganized and quadrennial) Pythia in 582, there was a shift from material prizes to wreaths (Paus. 10.7.5).⁵ Perhaps, early Delphi had value prizes because it focused on musical events, for music was a specialized profession very early in Greece. When athletics were added in 586, war booty was available, and musical value prize traditions were extended to athletics; but Delphi gave value prizes for athletics only once. By 582, the athletic events became stephanitic, as at Olympia, and they carried the musical prizes with them. All Pythian prizes became wreaths of laurel, sacred to Apollo, cut in the Valley of Tempe by a boy with living parents, as at Olympia (Plut. *Mor.* 1136a). Also like Olympia, at some point, Delphi proclaimed a truce for its games. Aristotle compiled a list of Pythian victors (Christesen 2007, 374–81), as he did for Olympia, and an honorific inscription from Delphi records that Aristotle's list was to be copied onto stone (*SIG*³ 275).

Delphi's program continued to evolve (Fontenrose 1988, 127; Miller 2012, 202). Also in 582, a four-horse chariot race was added, with Kleisthenes of Sikyon as the first winner. Hardly abandoning music, Delphi added a contest in kithara-playing in 558. A hoplite race was introduced in 498, not long after Olympia had introduced one in 520; and 346 brought a boys' *pankration*, which Olympia did not adopt until 200 BCE. Olympia added a chariot race for foals in 384, before Delphi did in 378, but Delphi added a *synoris* (two-horse chariot, 338) and *keles* (horse race, 314) for foals before Olympia did in 264 and 256, respectively. The Pythia's hybrid program reflects Olympia's influence in the 580s, but Delphi established its own identity by retaining musical events, offering more boys' events than Olympia, and adopting some foals' events well before Olympia.

Sanctuary and facilities

Like Olympia, Delphi's sanctuary attracted numerous votive dedications as well as treasuries, notably those of Athens and Siphnos.⁶ Also like Olympia, Delphi knew political tensions and manipulations via dedications and displays as different distant and local regions validated and promoted themselves (Scott 2010, 75–145).⁷ The Temple of Apollo at Delphi, probably originally in wood, was redone in stone in the late sixth century with Athenian involvement (Hdt. 2.180, 5.62). (The remains visible today are of the third temple of the later fourth century.) Just above the temple, the theater for musical and dramatic events, in its stone version, dates to the second century BCE. Originally, the athletic events perhaps took place below on the Krisean Plain, but a stadium was added higher up the slope above the temple in the fifth century by means of terracing and a retaining wall. An inscription of c.

450 on the retaining wall prohibits (and sets fines) for bringing wine into the stadium (*CID* 1.3, Miller 2012, no. 100). Herodes Atticus provided stone seating at this stadium, as he did at Athens, and a monumental gateway with three arches was added in the second century CE (see [Figure 7.1](#)). Delphi provides the earliest extensive remains of a gymnasium, built down the slope below the sanctuary c. 330 BCE. On two terraces, the gymnasium and *palaistra* complex included running tracks, a palaistra, a dressing room, and a large round pool. Equestrian events stayed in the plain below.⁸



Figure 7.1 Stadium at Delphi from the west side with entrance at end.

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Sophocles set the chariot race scene in his *Electra* at Delphi. In the tragedy, a slave tells a false story of Orestes' victories in the *stadion* and other contests (681–756, Miller 2012, no. 68). Sophocles' attentive spectators admired the radiant youth and cheered announcements of his wins, but they soon pitied his death. The play includes a dramatic chariot race won by driver from Athens, the “city built by the gods,” the only one of ten entries to finish the race. Orestes hung back, intending to make his move late, but when his and the Athenian team were the only ones left after several crashes, his competitive drive took over. The chariots were running neck in neck, but Orestes was not careful enough at the last turn, and his chariot's axle hit the turn post. He was thrown from the chariot, entangled in the reins, and dragged.

As the crowd saw him somersault, there arose a wail of pity for the youth—for his daring deeds and his disastrous end—while he was now bounced onto the ground, now flung head over heels into the sky. At last the charioteers caught his steeds and freed the blood-stained corpse, disfigured

and marred past the recognition of his best friend. (749–756)

The multiple crashes, impassioned fans, danger at the turns, and Orestes' shocking death and bloody corpse are elements worthy of the Roman circus. Even with tragic embellishment, this fictional account was credible—and entertaining—to Classical Greeks.

Delphi attracted benefactors, visitors, and famous athletes, including Milo of Kroton and Theagenes of Thasos (see [Chapter 10](#)), but in art history its greatest claim to fame is the Charioteer of Delphi, found in 1896. Only the charioteer and minor pieces remain from the original dedication of *c.* 474 by Polykallos, tyrant of Gela in Sicily, of a bronze statue group of a four-horse chariot with a victor and driver aboard. Notable also are a pair of archaic statues often associated with Kastor and Polydeukes (brothers of Helen) or with Herodotus' story (1.31) of Kleobis and Biton (Sansone 1991). The statue group of the family of Daochos of Thessaly, a delegate to the Amphictyony in the 330s, includes Lysippos' fourth-century statue of Agias, the Olympic *pankration* victor of 484. Moved by piety and ambition, Greeks honored Apollo at Delphi with athletic and artistic efforts rivaling those at Olympia.

Isthmian Games

Macedonians and, later, Romans made important announcements at the festival of Poseidon at Isthmia because the combination of its centrally strategic location (*c.* 11 km east of Corinth on the eastern side of the Isthmus of Corinth), its accessibility by sea from the east and west, and its status as one of the Panhellenic crown games meant that crowds there included Greeks from all over. Nearby Corinth, which supervised the games, was famous for its wealth, trade, and varied entertainments, and the Isthmian festival offered a grand opportunity to publicize the latest news affecting Greece, or simply a large audience for enterprising sophists and merchants. An oration of 97 CE (Dio Chrys. *Or.* 8.9–12; Miller 2012, no. 145), ostensibly recounting a visit by Diogenes the Cynic to the Isthmian Games in the mid-fourth century BCE, reveals various extraneous activities. Diogenes complains about performers and merchants hawking their wares: “crowds of wretched sophists (philosophers and teachers) ... their so-called students ... many historians reading out their dumb writings... poets ... magicians ... fortune-tellers... countless lawyers perverting justice, and not a few peddlers peddling whatever came to hand.”

Myths provide two main explanations for the origin of the Isthmian Games. In one, Melikertes, nephew of King Sisyphos, drowned at sea and his corpse ended up at the Isthmus. Sisyphos founded funeral rites and games for him there, and his name was changed to Palaimon (Paus. 1.44.7–8). Suggesting Athenian connections or interest, another myth (Plut. *Thes.* 25.4–5) says Theseus founded games for Poseidon at the Isthmus because Herakles began

games for Zeus at Olympia. Supposedly, there were earlier rites, held at night, to Melikertes, but different traditions say Theseus started the games to honor Sciron or Sinis, whom he killed in his labors. Plutarch also adds that Theseus arranged that Athenian spectators at the games would have a place of honor as large in extent as the sail of the ship in which they came.

Archaeological finds (e.g., ritual vessels, remains of ash and bone, and early terracotta dedications) indicate cult activity at the site from the mid-eleventh century on, and early metal dedications (e.g., figurines and armor) show increasing elite participation from c. 700 on. As at Olympia, a local sanctuary became the focus of expanding interest. By tradition, in 582 or 580, shortly after the reign of the Kypselid tyrants at Corinth, an earlier festival at Isthmia was reorganized with a very extravagant program.⁹ As at Delphi, the Olympic model was adopted, but it did not preclude local variations. For example, unlike Olympia, Isthmia had three age categories (boys, youths, and men). There were typical Olympic events (e.g., footraces, pentathlon, *pankration*), but the equestrian events were especially prominent, which was entirely appropriate for Poseidon as a god of horses. There also were contests in music, recitation, writing, and painting, and, at some point, apparently even a boat race. The original prize was a wreath of pine, but it was later changed to a wreath of dry celery, perhaps out of rivalry with Nemea (Plut. *Mor.* 676f; Broneer 1962).

Little remains but the outlines or substructures of the once-grand buildings at Isthmia. Surrounded by an enclosure, the small sanctuary included an early Temple to Poseidon of c. 650 and a theater, but there are no remains of an early sanctuary of Palaimon. The games at Isthmia seem to have been disrupted by Mummius' sack of Corinth in 146 BCE; they shifted thereafter to Sikyon. While the games returned in 44 BCE the sanctuary was not embellished until the second century CE, once again through the patronage of Herodes Atticus (Kajave 2002). Pausanias' description (2.1.7–2.2) of the Roman stage of the site notes the later Temples of Poseidon and Palaimon, the stadium, and various dedications.

Adjacent to the early sanctuary was the first stadium, probably constructed after the building of the first temple. The second stage of the stadium in the later fifth century included a new starting line, complete with postholes and a starter's pit. Now known as the "triangular pavement," this was an early, experimental form of starting mechanism (*hysplex*). A starter manipulated strings guided by staples and attached to wooden gates. When he released the strings, hinged bars in the lanes dropped, theoretically assuring a fair start.¹⁰ In a few years, this system was covered over and replaced with a traditional starting line with single toe grooves. A later stadium of the late fourth century, outside the sanctuary in a ravine c. 250 m to the southeast, has been located but awaits full excavation. S.G. Miller (2004a, 105) feels that it may be similar in form to other stadia of that time at Olympia and Nemea, and he

suggests that the shifting of later stadia away from the religious centers “... probably resulted from the need to provide larger and more elaborate spectator space as athletics developed into more of an entertainment industry.” Indeed, the architectural and spectacular features of the great games were more prominent by the late fourth century (Miller 2014), but even Homer’s simple games had engaged spectators who found athletics entertaining and impressive.

Due to its location and notoriety, Isthmia became an object of contention. For reasons that remain obscure, including the mysterious “Curse of Moline” (Paus. 5.2.1–2), which involved a mythical violation by Herakles of the Isthmian truce for the games, Eleans boycotted the Isthmian Games throughout antiquity (Paus. 6.3.9, 6.16.2). In 412, when Corinth was celebrating the Isthmia, which delayed their joining the Peloponnesian fleet to promote anti-Athenian revolution at Chios, the Athenians, having been invited by the proclamation of the truce, were able to learn of the Chians’ intentions while at the games (Thuc. 8.9.1–2). Later, when Argos had taken over Corinth and was preparing the Isthmian Games in 390, Agesilaos of Sparta took over the sanctuary by force and stayed there while Corinthian exiles held their version of the Isthmian Games. After Agesilaos and the Spartans left, the Argives returned and completed staging their Isthmian Games (Xen. *Hell.* 4.5.1–2,4). Like Olympia, Isthmia was not free of politics or violence, but it suffered less disruption than Nemea.

Nemean Games

Site of the latest and least of the crown games, Nemea has provided great archaeological excitement since excavations began in the 1970s under S.G. Miller. His meticulous work has revealed the complex of athletic facilities, the operation of the games, and Nemea’s sadly episodic and stunted history.¹¹

Myth, cult, and early history

While the myth of Herakles and the Nemean lion might suggest that Herakles founded these games to Zeus as a thanksgiving, Miller points out that Herakles is not attested as the founder in classical Greek literature. Miller (2004a, 106–7) stresses the primacy of the hero cult of Opheltes, infant son of King Lycurgus of Nemea. In the myth, Opheltes was set down by his nurse in a patch of wild celery and killed by a snake. The Seven Against Thebes, passing through the area, renamed him Archemoros (Hyg. *Fab.* 74; Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.6.4) and established funeral games for him (in which each of the seven was a victor). The judges’ black robes, the wild celery crown, and the grove of cypress trees at Nemea all recalled the funeral of the baby-hero.

Without a strategic or inviting location (c. 21 km southwest of Corinth) or local attractions, Nemea was a remote, parochial, interstate cult sanctuary in a

sheep-herding area. Even more than the reorganizations of Delphi and Isthmia, the creation of the Nemean games and sanctuary was an artificial act (Miller 2004a, 111). In 573, nearby Kleonai, under the continuing influence of Argos, established games at Nemea, defining the sanctuary and building an early Temple of Zeus with a long exterior altar. The festival and sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia was the obvious model for this invention of an athletic tradition and center.

Although there were equestrian events, Nemea's program emphasized gymnastic events. Like Athens, Nemea apparently had events in three age categories (boys, youths, and men), but it had no musical contests until the Hellenistic era. Buildings (*oikoi*) with ornate fronts and plain back rooms, served as storerooms and meeting halls for various states, appeared in the first half of the fifth century; but between festivals, there was no permanent resident population in Classical times, only a few priests and caretakers. Inscriptions show that a truce was announced, and envoys (*theoroi*) were sent throughout Greece in groups of six, visiting various cities and being received by local representatives (*Nem. Inv.* no. I 73, I 85; Miller 1988).

Miller has shown that the Ophelteion southwest of the Temple of Zeus, a roughly pentagonal area enclosed by a wall by the late fourth century, rested upon an earlier artificial mound or tumulus (of purified earth), one that was leveled later in the early Hellenistic era. The mound was built in the first half of the sixth century, perhaps c. 573, and covered with alternating layers of whitish and reddish earth. Finds of ritual vessels indicate that the layers were sanctified with libations. The discoveries of reused single-foot grooved blocks from a starting line and of an artificial layer of white clay combine to establish the location of an early stadium running along the east side of the Ophelteion. To the west of the Ophelteion, Miller has located an early hippodrome, evidenced by a layer of sand and gravel complete with grooves left by chariot wheels in the clay silt of the flood plain. An extension of the mound of the Ophelteion, sloping to the north, provided space for spectators, who apparently watched equestrian events to the west or turned to watch stadium events to the east. Miller emphasizes the importance of the cult of Opheltes in the sanctuary and the Ophelteion's strategic relationship to both the stadium and hippodrome (Miller 2002, 2004a, 110–11, 2004b 131–3). Inspiration from the Pelopeion at Olympia seems likely, for Nemea followed Olympia in its truce, envoys, and (to a degree) its program of events. Hero cults may have paralleled or predated Zeus cults in both sites, but both sites were dedicated above all to Zeus. Olympian gods best suit Panhellenic festivals.

Nemea attracted fiercely competitive athletes. A mid-sixth-century inscription on a statue base at Nemea declares that Aristis of Kleonai won the Nemean *pankration* four times (*SEG* 11.290). Although it took place when the Nemean Games were held at Argos (c. 410–330 BCE, below), a long boxing match between Kreugas of Epidamnos and Damoxenos of Syracuse reveals the

dangerous passions involved (Paus. 8.40.3–5, Miller 2012, no. 38). After fighting until nightfall, the boxers accepted the judges' proposal that each would let the other deliver a single blow:

Now Kreugas aimed his punch at Damoxenos' head. Then Damoxenos told Kreugas to lift his arm, and ... Damoxenos struck him under the ribs with his fingers straight out. The combination of his sharp fingernails and the force of his blow drove his hand into Kreugas' guts. He grabbed Kreugas' intestines and tore them out and Kreugas died on the spot. The Argives expelled Damoxenos on the ground that he had broken his agreement by giving his opponent several blows [*i.e.*, one for each of his fingers] instead of the agreed-upon one blow. They gave the victory to the dead Kreugas and erected a statue of him in Argos.

Not only were fighters willing to die in pursuit of an Olympic victory, this one was willing to disembowel and kill his opponent for a Nemean victory. Less ominously, a single pit east of the Temple of Zeus yielded an iron discus, a lead jumping weight, javelin points, and drinking cups. Cleary, a pentathlete had dedicated his athletic equipment and the drinking vessels from a celebration (Miller 1990, 38–9).

Politics and war

Due to its location or lack of an oracle, the sanctuary at Nemea was free of military dedications, but its history was far from free of disruption and warfare. In the late fifth century (c. 415–410), a pitched battle and violent destruction ruined the temple and the site. Argos probably took control of the site and games, soon shifting them to Argos (c. 410–330). This was just the first stage in Nemea's history of instability, interference, and conflict. In 388, the Spartan Agesipolis waged war against Argos by way of Nemea and ignored Argive claims that a holy truce was in place. Argos had improperly declared a truce at an abnormal time to try to prevent the Spartan invasion (Xen. *Hell.* 4.7.2–3). Around 330, Nemean Games were restored at Nemea, probably by Macedon as part of Philip's policy of renovating and embellishing sites to assert its unification and control of Greece in the second half of fourth century (see [Chapter 12](#)). An inscription of 311 from a well at Nemea (*IG IV*² 1.68.70–3) shows that King Demetrios Poliorketes of Macedon, probably following Philip's example, established a league that was to meet at Nemea.

Early Hellenistic building projects

An extensive and spectacular reorganization of Nemea c. 330–300 included a new Temple of Zeus with a large exterior stone altar. A bath complex, complete with two tub rooms, a pool, and a hydraulic system, was added southwest of the Temple, along with a Xenon or hotel for athletes and

trainers, with rooms for sleeping and eating. There was even a bronze sculptor's workshop and a kiln for producing roof tiles on site. The most dramatic discovery for sport history was the early Hellenistic athletic complex with its stadium, tunnel, and changing room (see [Figures 7.2](#) and [7.3](#)).



Figure 7.2 Stadium at Nemea (c. 330–320 BCE), from the southeast with the starting line and tunnel entrance leading west to the *apodyterion*.

Photo by Stephen Miller, used with permission.



Figure 7.3 Vaulted entrance to the Nemea stadium c. 320 BCE, with the track at the far end.

Photo by Stephen Miller, used with permission.

Set into the slopes of the Evangelista Hill, c. 450 m southeast of the Temple of Zeus, the new Nemean stadium was part of a broad pattern in the latter fourth-century of establishing complexes with a stadium, a tunnel, and an *apodyterion* (a “locker room”) (Miller 2001, 62–139). Similar complexes have been found at Athens, Epidauros, and Olympia (Miller 2001, 139–224). Other than a judges’ stand and possibly some front row seats for dignitaries, there was little formal seating at Nemea for the estimated 40,000 spectators, just some informal seating ledges cut into the bedrock at the south end of the stadium. Herodes Atticus’ second-century CE benefactions brought stone seating at other sites, but there were no games at Nemea at that time. Modest seating arrangements hardly deterred fans. Coins found on the site show that spectators came from all over the eastern Mediterranean, and concentrations of coins of certain states (e.g., from Argos near the judges’ area and from Corinth on the opposite side of the stadium) suggest “cheering sections” (Miller 2004a, 109–10). With water channels with settling basins, the stadium had a clay track sloping 178 m from north to south. The north end of the

stadium is now eroded away, but the southern end shows that there were markers at intervals along the sides of the track. In distances between the markers, and in the width of the track over its length, there was a lack of exactitude of measurement characteristic of Greek stadiums (Miller 1990, 177).

The first starting line in this stadium consisted of a typical row of stone blocks with two parallel toe grooves and with sockets for posts between lanes. Individual posts were used for shorter races, and lanes were marked in chalk. An extra post in front of the line, a little off center, was a turning post for the longer race (*dolichos*). At a later stage (after the 330s but before the 270s), officials recut the starting line, modified and compressed the lanes, and added a starting mechanism (*hysplex*) using the tension from twisted rope to drop rope barriers from all the lanes at the same time.¹²

A well-preserved 36 m long entrance tunnel runs at a right angle to the track, goes through the hill, and connects the stadium with the Sacred Way to the Temple of Zeus. Architecturally similar in construction methods to Macedonian tombs, it reflects Macedonian influence at Nemea, as well as the introduction of the arch into Greece via Alexander's campaigns. The tunnel provided a spectacular entrance for athletes, and the athletes clearly spent some time in the tunnel awaiting the herald's announcement of their names, for the tunnel's walls bear graffiti scratched into them. One athlete applauds the beauty of Akrotatos, who is probably the Spartan prince (and king of 265–252 BCE) of that name; and the Telestas recorded is probably the Olympic boys' boxing victor of c. 340 BCE. At the western end of the tunnel is a three-sided colonnaded structure, an *apodyterion* or a "locker room," where athletes changed and prepared themselves. Many roof tiles from the structure were found, complete with the name Sosikles, the Argive architect in charge of the construction.¹³

Concerning the shifting of the stadium away from the cult center at Nemea, Miller again (2004a, 210–11; also see Miller 2014) comments that the spread of such elaborate and well-designed complexes c. 320–300 indicates a new attention to spectacularity: "We cannot be certain of the purpose of the new form, but we can see clearly its effects. Athletes and spectators were divided into two distinct groups, and we see therein the first physical evidence for the athlete as entertainer" Miller suggests a decline from participatory or democratic athletics to spectatorship and athletics as entertainment, but again, earlier Greeks were already attentive to athletics as spectacular entertainment.¹⁴ The development of Greek stadium complexes c. 330–300 is architecturally significant indeed; but the full architectural development of gymnasia, so often associated with the participatory physical ideals of citizenship, also seems to have been a fourth-century and Hellenistic phenomenon. Idealism aside, the relative simplicity of earlier Greek athletic facilities gave way to expansion and elaboration with increased resources,

interstate emulation and rivalry, and royal patronage. The Macedonian takeover of Greece and the exposure of Macedonian rulers to Near Eastern traditions of royally fostered and well-orchestrated royal spectacles were not irrelevant. Rather than deteriorating from a pure, ideal Greek model of sport, latter fourth-century sport was adapting to an earlier Near Eastern model of spectacles.

Despite the site's architectural embellishment, by 271, the Nemean Games were shifted permanently back to Argos. Then c. 235 Aratos of Sikyon temporarily established alternative Nemean Games at Kleonai. Aratos and the Achaeans blockaded the rival Nemean Games held at Argos, breaking the truce and violating its right of safe passage. They captured and sold into slavery athletes who crossed their territory to compete in the Argive games (Plut. *Arat.* 28.3–4). Aratos or returning Argives probably caused the violent, widespread destruction at Nemea c. 235, and games were never held again at the site after 235. Panhellenism and piety did not spare Nemea; Nemean games took place at the site of Nemea for less than a quarter of their existence (Miller 1990, 193).

Patterns in panhellenic games

As noted, the venerable Olympics were a model for the introduction of athletic contests at Delphi, Isthmia, and Nemea. The four festivals shared Olympic elements including crowns, truces, envoys, multiple cults, and complicated myths of origin. Olympia's program of contests was influential, but there was no standardized program among the crown games. Despite their stature, the great crown games, especially Nemea, knew politics and exploitation, spectacular violence, excited crowds, and nonathletic activities; but they housed and inspired marvelous athletic competitions and masterpieces of art and architecture for centuries.

Variations: Local or Civic Games

The Panhellenic games have earned the royal share of historians' attention, and they remain the ancient (and less satisfactorily the modern) ideal and model, but we need to look beyond the crown games. Greece also had hundreds of local games put on by city-states or local sanctuaries.¹⁵ For example, the sanctuary of Asklepios in Epidauros is best known as a center of healing, but it also held athletic and musical games. Like the crown festivals, the Asklepeia games had judges, envoys, a procession from Epidauros, and a sacrifice. Fitting the pattern noted above, the sanctuary gained an athletic complex with a new stadium, tunnel, and changing room in the second half of the fourth century (Tomlinson 1983, 90–2; Sève 1993).

Also in the Peloponnese, local games took place in the festival of Zeus Lykaeos at a sanctuary to Zeus on Mt. Lykaion. Known from Pindar (*Ol.*

9.95–8, 13.107–8, *Nem.* 10.45–8), inscriptions (*IG* 5.2 549, 550), and Pausanias (8.38.5), athletic contests similar to those at Olympia were held from at least the fifth century. The site is exceptional for adding a track for footraces inside its hippodrome, which is the best-preserved hippodrome in mainland Greece (Romano 1993, 95).

Recent excavations have confirmed a Mycenaean phase at the sanctuary (Romano and Voyatzis 2010), and Pliny the Elder (*HN* 7.205) says that the earliest gymnastic games in Greece were held on Mt. Lykaion and not at Olympia, prompting D. Romano (2014) to suggest that Lykaion games possibly were older than those at Olympia and that Olympia adopted contests (and the use of an ash altar) from the cult on Mt. Lykaion. However, there is no direct evidence for games before the fifth century, and Pausanias (8.2.1–2) says that, while the Lykaion games were older than the Panathenaic games, the Olympic games were older “than mankind.”

Local games also took place in northern Greece and further afield. For example, inscriptions and coins show that Larissa in Thessaly had local games to Zeus with gymnastic events and local equestrian contests (e.g., a torch race on horseback, an *apobates* race, and mounting and dismounting competitions). Larissa also hosted interesting bull sports or bull wrestling (*taurotheria*) in which a horseman pursued a bull, jumped off, and grasped it by the horns, and, twisting its head, wrestled it to the ground.¹⁶

Games at scores of other sites throughout the Greek mainland and islands, and colonies afar,¹⁷ confirm local variations and adaptations within a general pattern of athletic festivals. In Pamphylia in southern Asia Minor, Aspendos issued coins with images of a form of belt wrestling, perhaps a remnant from earlier traditions (see [Figure 12b](#) in [Chapter 12](#)). We can better understand the variety and vitality of Greek sport by coming down from Olympia to study local or civic athletics, especially at Athens and Sparta.

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Notes

- 1 As noted in Chapter 4, these four games are called “crown” (stephanitic) games because they offered only wreath prizes, unlike local material prize (chrematitic) games. While supported by classical texts, and appropriate for Archaic and Classical games, the traditional terms have been used too casually to suggest a simple and enduring dichotomy among all Greek games; see Remijsen (2011). In Hellenistic and Roman times (see Chapters 13 and 15), many new festivals were founded, the *periodos* was expanded, and categorization became more complex.
- 2 Aupert (1979); Fontenrose (1988); Picard (1989, 69–81); Amandry (1990); Miller (2004a, 95–101); Valavanis (2004, 162–267); Scott (2010, 41–145).
- 3 Davies (2007) notes that Delphi was an unusual Panhellenic site as an early village and because the Pythia lacked a strong hero-cult *aition*. Davies’ general model for the development of the sixth-century *periodos* emphasizes the significance of convenient strategic locations and gatherings for economic, religious, and other activities. Distrusting later speculations about early similarities, he suggests that Olympia’s prestige led to convergences of the other festivals along Olympic lines.
- 4 Morgan (1990, 106–90); Valavanis (2004, 260–5); Lehoux (2007).
- 5 On 586 and 582, see Miller (1978); Mosshammer (1982); Perrot (2009). On issues with early dates for the Pythia, see Christesen (2007, 179–202).
- 6 For lists of monumental dedications at Delphi by era, see Scott (2010, 309–47).
- 7 For example, Scott (2010, 77–81, 105–7) notes that the placement of Sparta’s monument for their victory at Aigospotamoi upstaged Athens’ earlier monument for its triumph at Marathon.
- 8 Aupert (1979) sees four stages from the fourth century BCE to the second century CE. An inscription, *CID* 2.139, Miller 2012, no. 81, records the contract for preparation of the site for 246 BCE. On later Delphi, see Weir (2004).
- 9 Jackson (1992, 141–4); Gebhard (1989, 82–8, 1992, 73–80, 2002, 221–37), suggesting the Isthmia gained panhellenic status perhaps only c. 550; Morgan (2002); Valavanis (2004, 268–303); Miller (2004a, 101–5).
- 10 Romano (1993, 24–33); Valavanis (1999, 9–10, 48–50); Miller (2004a, 101–15).
- 11 Miller (1980, 1989, 1992, 2001, 2004a, 105–12, 2004b); Valavanis (2004, 304–35).
- 12 On Greek starting lines and mechanisms, see Valavanis (1999, 57–141); on

Nemea's mechanism, see 145–73; or Miller (2004a, 37–43, 2004b, 199–202).

- 13 Graffiti: Miller (2001, 84–9, 2004a, 109), GRAF 14C, 2D; Sosikles: Miller (2001, 164–72).
- 14 Early Rome housed spectacular mass entertainments in fairly modest facilities for centuries; see Chapter 13.
- 15 On other local games, see Larmour (1999, 171–84, 187–92); Miller (2004a, 129–32, 145); Valavanis (2004, 393–7). On inscribed victor lists from local athletic contests, see Christesen (2007, 130–2).
- 16 Gallis (1988). Further on sport and victors in Thessaly, see Zafiropoulou (2004), including evidence for local games, 56–65; and Stamatopoulou (2007).
- 17 On games and victors in Western Greece, see Harrell (2002); Stampolidis and Tassoulas, eds. (2004) (including Lippolis (2004) on Italy, and Di Vita (2004) on Sicily); Antonaccio (2007, 2014).

Athens: City of Contests and Prizes

Besides, it is possible to find with us as nowhere else the most faithful friendships and to enjoy the most varied social intercourse; and, furthermore, to see contests not alone of speed and strength, but of eloquence and wisdom and of all the other arts- and for these the greatest prizes

Isokrates, *Panegyricus* 45, Loeb trans. G. Norlin

Most people associate Athens with democracy, philosophy, and cultural achievements, but athletics were a vital and popular part of Athenian religious, social, and political life, especially as a part of the Greater Panathenaic (all-Athenian) Games.¹ Unlike Olympia, Athens housed several athletic festivals and a much wider program of events, including torch and team events, and it gave valuable material prizes for three age classes and for more than first place. Although less prestigious than the crown games of the *periodos*, in terms of finances and fanfare, the Panathenaia was by far the greatest local or “chrematitic” (giving valuable prizes) athletic festival. Victor inscriptions prominently list it just after the games of the *periodos*. Ironically, books on Olympia are routinely illustrated with Athenian vase paintings depicting sport at Athens, not Olympia.

Athens was a dynamic city-state, and its athletics (the sites, circumstances, prizes, and participants) developed in close relationship with public life, urbanization, social change, and civic administration and finance. Leading citizens organized the games, and the state obliged wealthy individuals to finance some of the events. Developments at Athens, such as social change and the policies of various leaders, influenced athletics, and in turn athletics affected Athens’ topography, festive calendar, administration, and social life. When Solon wanted to calm Athens, when Peisistratos wanted to please Athens, when Kimon wanted to lead Athens, when Pericles wanted to promote Athens, and when Lycurgus wanted to revitalize Athens, they paid attention to athletics.

As the best documented city-state (e.g., with inscriptions, prize lists, archaeology, Panathenaic vases, and Aristotle’s *Ath. Pol.*), one with a rich and spectacular array of games and performances, Athens provides our best chance to understand the interplay of cult, sport, and community, and to see the diversity and vitality of sport in the lives of citizens. Athens lets us look past the Superbowl and World Series to see state championships and high school sport in the life of a community. Imagine native Athenians, including

tribal teams, competing against each other in front of friends and relatives. On game day, Athenians of all classes, perhaps females as well, gathered to watch. Despite tensions, the contests, the festival, and the conviviality of sacrificial meals and celebrations reinforced communal harmony and pride.

A discussion of civic athletics (i.e., athletics held in or near town with a high degree of official state involvement) in Archaic and Classical Athens complements recent trends in the study of festivals, cults, and contests in the life of ancient communities. We increasingly interpret civic performances and ceremonies as expressions of mass interests and not just as political manipulations by leaders. S. Goldhill, for example, emphasizes the civic role of spectacles—of staged scenes watched and evaluated—in the assembly, courts, and theaters. He suggests that fifth-century democratic Athens developed a self-conscious theorization about performance, a “public discourse of democracy” (Goldhill and Osborne 1999, 8–9). Shared experiences and communication between ritual performers and audiences strengthened community formation and civic consciousness because people related to historical continuity and change by visual or physical memories.

This essay first discusses Athens’ Greater Panathenaic Festival and its prizes, program, and operation, followed by a brief survey of other festivals and facilities at Athens, and then an overview of Athens’ sociopolitical sport history. (Further on Athenian and Greek athletes, see [Chapter 10](#).) Finally, it discusses attitudes to athletics, including criticisms of athletic customs, which can best be interpreted in an Athenian context.

The Panathenaic Games: Sacred and Civic Athletics

Archaic Athens (c. 750–500) arranged an annual festival to Athena called the Panathenaia to coincide with and celebrate the start of the Athenian year, which began in July. From 566/5 on, Athens celebrated an expanded Panathenaia with special magnificence every fourth year, so there were two versions of the Panathenaia, the Greater and the Lesser. Inscriptions of c. 560 from the Acropolis mentioning a *dromos* (a racecourse or a race) and an *agon* (a contest) administered by a board of civic officials (*hieropoioi*) probably refer to Panathenaic Games (Raubitschek 1949, nos. 326–8).

Lasting several days, the Greater Panathenaia included a religious procession through the city and up to the Acropolis, a sacrifice of 100 cattle and distribution of the meat for feasting, the presentation of a special robe (*peplos*) to the cult statue of Athena, and a varied program of contests (see later). The Lesser Panathenaia featured a procession and some contests (Shear 2003a, 171–2; Tracy 2007), but the contests at the Greater Panathenaia (usually called the Panathenaic Games in modern scholarship) became Athens’ sporting showplace for the wider Greek world and the most prominent Greek

“local” or “civic” athletic festival.

Athenian tradition attributed the origins of its greatest athletic festival to mythical figures such as Erichonios or Erechtheus, or to heroes like Theseus (Plut. *Thes.* 24.3–4), the legendary unifier of Attica, but athletic games at the Panathenaia prior to 566 cannot be proven. Processions, military displays, dances, and cultic rituals seem more likely. By the 560s, however, aristocratic Athenians were familiar with crown and material games and prizes, and a more assertive Athens was ready to declare its status through its own games and prizes. As elsewhere, the combination of athletic competitions with a regular festival enhanced the popularity of both elements.

Apparently, Athens added gymnastic contests to (or expanded them within) the reorganized Greater Panathenaia of 566, but the historical circumstances remain unclear. Amidst the political factionalism of the 560s, some leader or group opportunistically promoted the festival as a forum for ceremony, competition, and recreation. Some credit the events of 566 to Peisistratos, who was not yet tyrant but might have been involved to increase his popularity. The eponymous archon (the magistrate after whom the year was named) in 566, Hippokleides, son of Tisandros, was a member of an agonistic family. Herodotus (6.127) calls him the wealthiest and best-looking man in Athens. Although he ultimately embarrassed himself (Hdt. 6.129), he (along with Megakles II of the aristocratic clan of the Alkmeonidai) had shown athletic training as a suitor at Sikyon (see [Chapter 4](#)). While there, he perhaps learned the publicity value of contests and facilities (Neils 2007, 51).

Panathenaic amphoras

For the Greater Panathenaia, Athens introduced prizes of sacred olive oil in decorated amphoras, masterpieces of art and communication.² In myth, Athena had given Athens the gift of an olive tree, and olive oil was one of Athens’ most famous exports. In the evolution of Greek prizes away from miscellaneous *ad hoc* prizes, Panathenaic amphoras were an innovative development as civic, self-declaratory prizes of material and symbolic value. The motives of those responsible are suggested by the earlier history of Greek athletic prize giving, by the design and elements of the early Panathenaics, and by contemporary Athenian history.

In the 560s, power and decision making rested with aristocrats. From their viewpoint, the amphoras combined elite traditions of aristocratic athletics and gift giving with the specific context of Athens. Panathenaic prizes were given to reward victors, certainly, but also to promote the interests of the state. Pericles’ later claim (Thuc. 2.40.4–5) that Athens gave gifts freely without any thought of return benefits is rhetorical. Seeing the value of hosting as well as winning contests, Athens gave prizes in agonistic contexts to rival other states and to earn honor and fame, which brought economic and political

benefits. Representatives of the corporate state gave gift-prizes collegially to establish relationships and to declare the status of Athens.

The earliest known Panathenaic prize, the Burgon amphora of *c.* 560, does not have all the canonical decorations of later amphoras. The front bears a warlike Athena and a prize inscription, and the reverse shows an equestrian event. The canonical decorations appear later in the sixth century: with the prize inscription, the front panel shows Athena between Doric columns supporting cocks, and the reverse shows some athletic activity (see [Figure 8.1](#)). These vases compound aspects of Athena: the oil recalls her contest against Poseidon; the vase recalls Athena as a goddess of crafts (*Ergane*); her warlike appearance shows her as a protectress (*Pallas* or *Promachos*); the columns may refer to some temple; the cocks may suggest Athena as a bird goddess; the inscription suggests Athena *Polias* (patroness of the city); and the athletic scenes recall Athena as *Nike* (goddess of victory) or *Hippia* (goddess of horses). This combination of images of Athena as the goddess of Athens and its games was a graphic evocation of civic identity and pride.



Figure 8.1 Panathenaic prize amphora by Euphiletos Painter, obverse. Image of Athena between columns. c. 530 BCE. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1907. Inv.07.286.79.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence.

Although the Panathenaic Games of Classical Greece (500–323 BCE) were not classed as “crown” games (see [Chapter 7](#)), art and monuments show that wreaths and fillets also were given as supplemental decorations (Valavanis 1990). A relevant insight may come from Pericles’ Funeral Oration (Thuc. 2.46.1), which contrasts his words (the speech) with substantial actions done to honor the dead, such as raising their children at state expense: “the state thus offers a valuable crown (*ophelimon stephanon*) in these contests....” In

other words, Pericles and Athens supported material benefits as well as ceremonial honors for victors and heroes. Their games had wreaths, as at Olympia, but Athenians upheld the aristocratic tradition of valuable prizes. The result was the valuable and sacred Panathenaic oil, the fruit as well as the foliage of the olive. Panhellenic wreaths brought the greatest glory but, as Isokrates (*Paneg.* 46) says, Athens' contests had the "greatest prizes."

Originally, the prize sacred olive oil came from taboo-guarded trees (Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 60.2), but the oil was administered by leaders familiar with earlier prize traditions. The idea of giving a local product as a prize was widespread, but the decision to give the oil in large quantities, not token amounts, perhaps reflects the economic policies of the reformer Solon, including the promotion of oil exportation and the stimulation of the pottery industry. Symbolic prizes gained substantial material worth. Each amphora contained c. 10 gallons of oil, and D. Young (2004, 99) suggests that a Panathenaic men's *stadion* victor won 100 vases of oil, worth perhaps the equivalent of \$135,600.³

The design and decoration of the Panathenaics represent a significant innovation in the history of prizes. The use of amphoras came from the choice of quantities of oil as the prize, but Athens initiated new, distinctively decorated amphoras with a martial Athena on the obverse and athletic scenes on the reverse. A step beyond *ad hoc* prestige goods or orally dependent crowns, Panathenaic amphoras were fully self-declaratory. Their images indicated which games and even which events were involved. The beautiful, clear messages were intelligible even to people on the fringes of the Greek world.

With distant communication in mind, Athens also added an official prize inscription: "one of the prizes from Athens" (*ton Athenethen athlon*). An original, integral element, the inscription indicates the thinking behind the prize. Unlike earlier inscriptions added to finished objects, these inscriptions were added before the vases were fired. The simple wording is not incidental: Athens wanted an explicit ethnic reference. Given its purposefulness, the inscription is the *sine qua non* for official prize vases. Amphoras that look like prize vases but tend to be smaller and lack the prize inscription are "pseudo-Panathenaics" or "amphoras of Panathenaic shape" (Neils 1992, 42–6; cf. Hamilton 1996). Official prizes "speak" for themselves and emphasize origin (donor) rather than ownership (victor). Ultimate ownership was an unpredictable matter of victory and possible sale, and glorification of the victor beyond the awarding of the prize was a matter for his family and friends. Athens' goal was to ensure its donor-honor and potential benefits for the state.

Before each Greater Panathenaia, as at Olympia, envoys (*spondophoroi*) dispersed from Athens throughout the Greek world announcing the games, inviting participation, and apparently proclaiming a truce. Aristotle (*Ath. Pol.* 60.1, 62.2) provides details on the administration of the games in the fourth

century BCE. The ten officials (*athlothetai*) in charge, chosen by lot, one from each tribe, served for three years preparing the procession, the program of contests, and the presentation of the prizes. They commissioned at least 1400 and probably over 2000 prize vases per festival (Shear 2003b, 102), collected the oil, and put the names of the ten annual magistrates (the archons) on vases. The public treasury annually provided large sums to fund these arrangements.⁴

The complete Panathenaic prize (oil, amphora, two panels, and inscription) was a brilliant combination of elements, a hybrid prize for hybrid games. The prize vessel attached sacred and civic references to prize oil, producing a compound prize that was both sacred and civic, and both symbolic and valuable. When city-states became well established, they asserted their claims to independence by hosting games with valuable prizes and also by issuing coinage. The Panathenaic amphoras are like Athens' early owl tetradrachm coins (introduced c. 525 BCE): both bifacial objects used standardized civic iconography as well as an inscribed ethnic. Both were articulate products in large denominations intended to help promote the foreign export of surplus commodities (the silver of Laurion, oil, and pottery). In fact, the reverse of second-century BCE Athenian silver tetradrachms still proudly display Athena's owl resting on a horizontal Panathenaic amphora. Found abundantly abroad, from Italy to the Black Sea and Cyrene, these amphoras were transportable civic symbols that publicized—or “branded”—Athens as powerful, divinely favored, and wealthy. Games brought people to Athens, but prizes took Athens abroad.

The Panathenaic program

Athenians did not box or throw the discus in atypical ways, but Athens staged an eclectic program of events, with three age classes, and with team as well as individual contests. Inscriptions, literary evidence, and depictions on Panathenaic amphoras help us reconstruct the development of the Panathenaic program of events, which apparently was quite extensive in the sixth century and changed and expanded over time.⁵ Athens borrowed elements from Olympia and probably Delphi (Neils 2007) but also included a range of distinctive local contests.

By the fourth century, five of the nine days of the Panathenaic festival were devoted to athletic contests. After musical and dramatic contests on days one to three, days four and five were for gymnastic events open to all Greeks. Day six saw special “closed” (citizen-only) equestrian and cavalry events in the Agora (the market square), and day seven brought open chariot and horse races in the hippodrome. Day eight was for closed tribal events, and that night brought the torch race and “all-night” revel (*pannychis*). Day nine included the procession, a sacrifice of 100 oxen (as at Olympia), and a meat feast.

Fragments of an inscribed prize list (*IG II² 2311*) from 380 BCE provide invaluable evidence for the program of events, which included team as well as individual contests in three age classes as well as prizes for second place. Some special events were for Athenians only, but musical events and many Olympic-style gymnastic contests and hippic contests were open to all Greeks. The information contained in this inscription about the events and prizes is summarized in tabular form (see [Table 8.1](#)) (based on the reconstruction by Shear (2003b), which should also be consulted on the date of the inscription).

Table 8.1 Panathenaic prize list (380 BCE).

Source: After Shear (2003b).

<i>Event</i>	<i>First prize (number of amphoras of oil awarded)</i>	<i>Second prize (number of amphoras of oil awarded)</i>
Gymnastic events		
Boys' <i>Dolichos</i>	30	6
Boys' <i>Stadion</i>	50	10
Boys' pentathlon	30	6
Boys' wrestling	30	6
Boys' boxing	30	6
Boys' <i>Pankration</i>	40	8
Youths' <i>Stadion</i>	60	12
Youths' pentathlon	40	8
Youths' wrestling	40	8
Youths' boxing	40	8
Youths' <i>Pankration</i>	50	10
Men's <i>Dolichos</i>	60	12
Men's <i>Stadion</i>	80	16
Men's <i>Diaulos</i>	60	12
Men's pentathlon	?	?
Men's wrestling	?	?
Men's boxing	?	?
Men's <i>Pankration</i>	70	14
Men's <i>Hoplitodromos</i>	70	14
Hippic contests for citizens only		
<i>Apobates</i>	?	?
Hippic contests open to all		
Horse race	?	?
Four-colt chariot race	?	?
Four-horse chariot race	?	?
Two-colt chariot race	?	?

Two-horse chariot race	?	?
Colt <i>Zeugos</i>	40	8
Horse <i>Zeugos</i>	140	40
“For warriors”		
Horse race	16	4
Horse <i>Zeugos</i>	30	6
Processional <i>Zeugos</i>	4	1
Javelin from horseback	5	1
Tribal contests	First prize	Second prize Third prize
Boys’ Pyrrhic dance	1 ox worth 100 <i>drachmai</i>	
Youths’ Pyrrhic dance	1 ox	
Men’s Pyrrhic dance	1 ox	
Contest in manly excellence (<i>Euandria</i>)	1 ox	
Torch race	Winning Tribe: 1 ox	
Individual Victor: 1 hydria worth 30 <i>drachmai</i>		
Boat race	3 oxen	2 oxen 1 ox
<i>Anthippasia</i>	?	? ?
Men’s cyclic chorus	?	?
Boys’ cyclic chorus	?	?

After gold and silver crowns for musical victors, the inscription lists numbers of amphoras of oil awarded as first and second prizes (at a 5:1 ratio) in the gymnastic events, which were open to Athenians and non-Athenians alike, for three age categories (boys, youths (*ageneioi*), men).

Several early Panathenaic prize amphoras of *c.* 560–550 depicting footraces show that the *stadion*, *diaulos*, and *dolichos* all were early and continuing events (Neils 1992, 41–2). Since the hoplite race appears on Panathenaics of *c.* 520, Athens possibly had that event before it was introduced at Olympia in 520. Athens was unusual in offering a pentathlon in three age classes, and with second as well as first prizes. Since Olympia introduced the boy’s pentathlon in 628 but immediately dropped it, and Delphi introduced it in 586 and retained it, Delphi probably influenced Athens to some degree.

Wrestlers, often confronting each other in pairs, with a judge and an additional athlete nearby, appear on prize vases from the last third of the sixth century and continue. Apparently, there were matches for men (and possibly boys) in the sixth, for men and boys in the fifth, and for all three classes by the fourth century. Men’s boxing contests appear on sixth-century Panathenaics, and there were three age divisions by the fourth century. Panathenaics also depict the men’s *pankration* from the late sixth century on. Although it was not a boys’ event at Olympia until 200, the *pankration* was a youths’ event at Athens in the late fifth century and a boys’ event in the fourth century.

Next on the inscription come hippic events, starting with the distinctively (but not uniquely) Athenian *apobates* race, open only to Athenian citizens, with an uncertain numbers of jars of oil for first and second prizes. Magnificent figures in the Parthenon frieze immortalize *apobatai* as part of the fifth-century Panathenaia (Neils 2001, 138–41; Neils and Schultz 2012). Strongly associated with Athena and held on the Panathenaic Way in the Agora,⁶ this spectacular chariot race involved soldiers in armor dismounting and (probably) remounting speeding chariots (Schultz 2007).

The event apparently preserved anachronistic traditions of Homeric warfare in which chieftains were driven to the battle and dismounted to fight, remounting again for pursuit or flight (Crowther 1991). J. Neils (2012, 206) notes that the earliest images of *apobatai* in Athenian art, possibly inspired by rhapsodic contests in recitations of Homer, date to 480–470, and she suggests that the event, possibly on a tribal basis, was added to the Panathenaia after the Persian War to give the games an archaic touch. The race is not depicted on any known early prize Panathenaics, but it appears on a prize vase dated to 340–339 (see [Figure 8.2](#); Bentz 1998, 78–9).



Figure 8.2 Attributed to the Marsyas Painter, Attic Panathenaic Amphora with Lid, 340–339 BCE, Terracotta, Object (body): H: 78.5 × Diam.: 39.2 cm (30 7/8 × 15 7/16 in.) Object (with lid): H: 99.5 cm (39 3/16 in.), Athens, Greece, Europe.

A composition attributed to Demosthenes, the *Erotic Essay* (61.23–9), describes the *apobates* as a prestigious and dangerous “spectacle” for citizens only. It praises its militaristic combination of weapons, running, and charioteering, notes its spectacular qualities, and deems it worthy of grand prizes. The charioteer’s skill was important, but a reference (Plut. *Phoc.* 20.1–2) to a win (c. the 320s) by Phokos, the son of the general Phokion, suggests an individualized victory.

The following entries in the prize list pertain to hippic contests open to all and with relatively rich prizes. Victory in the *zeugos* (a race with a pair of equids yoked to a cart or sulky) for adult horses brought 140 amphoras. Numbers for the prestigious four-horse chariot races must have been larger still.

Equestrian scenes appear often on sixth- and fifth-century prize Panathenaics (Neils 1992, 34), and the *tethrippon* (four-horse chariot) is shown on prize vases from c. 550 on. Throughout Greece, the keeping of racehorses (the practice of hippotrophy) was proverbial proof of wealth and status (Isoc. 16.33; Arist. *Pol.* 1289b, 1321a). Pheidippides, a young would-be aristocrat in Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, obsessed with horses, drove his father into debt by purchasing expensive racehorses. The father, a narrow-minded, tight-fisted rustic, laments the expenses he took on when he raised his social status by marrying into a noble family with “Hipp-” or “horsey” names and equestrian pretensions.

Specified as reserved “for warriors” (*polemisteriois*) and probably reflecting Athens’ increased use of cavalry in recent decades, the next listings are four events open only to Athenian cavalymen, with prizes for first and second places: horserace, *zeugos* with horses, the processional *zeugos* (the details of which remain mysterious), and the javelin throw from horseback. Apparently, these equestrian events were seen as less prestigious, for they were awarded far fewer vases than the normal races, which may explain the lack of extant examples except for the javelin on horseback.

Themistokles, the hero of the Battle of Salamis, apparently had his son trained as a horseman, and the youth could throw a javelin standing upright on horseback (Pl. *Meno* 93d), but javelin throwing on horseback at a target does not appear on prize Panathenaics until the very end of the fifth century. Competitors on vases wear cloaks and some wear a broad-brimmed hat, and the target is a shield on a post. It was never an Olympic event, but it was part of the Heraia at Argos. Xenophon (*Eq. mag.* 1.21, 25; 3.6; *Eq.* 8.10; 12.12–13) recommends proficiency in this skill for military reasons, and he mentions javelin throwing in cavalry maneuvers at the Lyceum. The contest itself, the target, and Xenophon’s interest all suggest that the development of the cavalry influenced the Panathenaic program in the late fifth and fourth centuries.

Listed next, with oxen as prizes for a feast, are four events closed to non-

Athenians; the contestants were teams entered by each of the ten tribes (political divisions) of the Athenian citizenry. First comes the pyrrhic dance, which in myth Athena invented to celebrate the defeat of the Giants (Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 7.72.7). Groups of dancers, known as choruses (one chorus from each tribe for each of three different age classes and hence 30 choruses total), with shields, helmets, and spears, imitated defensive and offensive movements (Pl. *Leg.* 7.815a). With probable roots in old war dances, pyrrhic dances in armor were held throughout Greece (Wheeler 1982; Ceccarelli 2004) including both the Lesser and the Greater Panathenaia, and probably from at least 566. The performances were organized and financed by compulsory contributions (liturgies) imposed upon wealthy citizens.⁷ Atarbos' base of 432/1 from the Acropolis depicts nude pyrrhic dancers with shields and a clothed observer representing the sponsor (*choregos*); an inscription records the tribal victory (*IG II²* 3025).⁸

Next, the *euandria*, the tribal contest in "manly excellence," involved displays of size, strength, and training (Ath. 13.565f; Xen. *Mem.* 3.3.13; Neils 1994, 154–9; Crowther 1985). The handsome and fit winners were the first carriers of sacred objects in the Panathenaic procession.

Next came torch races, popular spectacles combining ritual (the transfer of sacred fire) and athletics, which took place in the Panathenaia and various other festivals (Bentz 2007). Other fourth-century inscriptions (e.g., *IG II²* 3019) record tribal victories and official sponsors (liturgical gymnasiarchs). The Panathenaic event was a relay race in which the winning team had to arrive first with its torch still lit (Paus. 1.30.2) (see [Figure 8.3](#)). Apparently, ten runners per tribe covered a distance of over 2500 m from the Academy gymnasium to the Acropolis (Fisher 2011, 189–90). The prize for the individual victor (*lampadephoros*) probably went to the runner who ran the final leg of the race for the winning team.



Figure 8.3 Athenian red-figure krater showing tribal torch race victor at altar and Nike nearby, attributed to the Nikias Painter, c. 420 BCE.

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Aristophanes' *Frogs* (1087–98) depicts the race in a comic light: Aeschylus (a traditional tragic playwright), blaming Euripides (a more innovative tragic dramatist), claims that runners no longer are adequately trained, and Dionysos recalls seeing an inglorious runner, plodding along, abused by the crowds until he breaks wind, blows out his torch, and departs. Comedy aside, Aristophanes' scene shows that training and fitness mattered, and that audience involvement was lively.

The next tribal event is the “contest of ships” (probably a boat race) with three placements and oxen for prizes. First attested in this inscription, it perhaps existed earlier to recognize sailors for assisting Athens' success or perhaps to increase popular participation in the games (Fisher 2011, 191). Most of the evidence is late, and details remain uncertain. Probably held from the Peiraeus around the promontory to Mounychia harbor (Plut. *Them.* 32.5), the event seems to have been a rowing contest among tribal crews of youths, but this is based on inscriptions and reliefs of Roman imperial times with depictions of youths with oars (Larmour 1990).

The final two sections of the inscription as preserved concern the *anthippasia*, a competitive riding display by two groups of cavalymen (with each group consisting of men from five of the ten tribal cavalry units; Xen. *Hipp.* 3.11–12) and cyclic choruses, another form of group dancing.⁹

Pericles proclaimed Athens a city “open to all” (Thuc. 2.39.1), and non-

Athenians were invited to share in the Panathenaia. Attracted by valuable prizes and the sights of a cosmopolitan city, non-Athenian athletes visited and competed in Panhellenic-style events. A fifth-century epigram records the victories of a runner, Nikoladas of Corinth, in various festivals including the Panathenaia (Ebert 1972, no. 26). In Aristophanes (*Ach.* 215), the Old Acharnian reminisces about running against a certain Phayllos, probably the famous athlete from Kroton (Hdt. 8.47). Pindar notes several non-Athenian victories at Athens, probably at the Panathenaia (*Nem.* 4.19, 10.33–6, *Isth.* 2.20, 4.25, *Ol.* 7.82, 9.88, 13.38–9). Participation by outsiders (apparently including Spartans, see [Chapter 9](#)), a form of external validation, enhanced the fame of Panathenaic competition and distributed prize vases widely. Later, the Hellenistic Panathenaia and Theseia continued to draw competitors from all over the Mediterranean (Tracy and Habicht 1991).

The Panathenaia culminated in a grand procession from the Dipylon Gate through the Kerameikos and Agora to the Acropolis. With this spectacular presentation of its wealth and power, Athens proudly put itself on display.¹⁰ Demonstrating political unity, and piety and gratitude to the patron deity of the city, the Panathenaic procession symbolized the community and, in time, its empire (Osborne 1994).

When the Delian League became an empire under the leadership of Pericles (461–429), the procession highlighted the Periclean building program on the Acropolis, notably the Parthenon with its famous frieze.¹¹ The frieze depicted the procession and its many elements—young cavalrymen on horseback, chariots, processioners and officials on foot, old men, metics (resident aliens) in special robes, women, and 100 oxen to be sacrificed—all ending with the receipt of a robe (*peplos*) by Athena and the “King Archon” (Archon Basileus).¹² Moving in both senses, spectacular processions drew crowds, which themselves became part of the spectacle. Athenians were surrounded with reminders of the richness of their civic and religious life in performances, art, and architecture. They also witnessed their power, for the procession also included *theoria* (embassies) of subject allies bringing offerings (a cow, a suit of armor) to Athena. Like Near Eastern reliefs of processions (e.g., the procession of figures bearing tribute at Persepolis c. 500–490), or reliefs on Roman triumphal arches, the frieze monumentalized the event, recreating it and making it a visible spectacle for centuries.

As ritual, celebration, and spectacle, the Panathenaic Games glorified the city and its goddess, attracted visitors, and satisfied the agonistic inclinations of the Athenians, directly by (individual or group) competition and vicariously by spectatorship. Whether athletes, officials, vase painters, or spectators, Athenians appreciated the thriving athletic life of their city.

More Athletic Festivals and Athletic Facilities

Classical Athens was an ideal home for athletics. Contests spread the fame of the city even as the imperial prosperity of Athens helped finance and extend its athletic program.¹³ The Panathenaia remained the showplace, but games permeated the Athenian calendar of festivals. Pericles' Funeral Oration (Thuc. 2.38.1) extols Athens for the "contests (*agones*) and sacrifices (*thusiai*) all year round" that refresh the spirits of the Athenians. Similarly, in 380 Isokrates (*Paneg.* 45) praised Athens for its many and magnificent festivals, some known for their extravagance, some for their artistry, and some for both. Although the Old Oligarch ([Xen.] *Ath. Pol.* 3.2; see page 168 later) exaggerated their negative impact, Athens apparently did have more festivals than other states, celebrating some 144 days of festival a year (Mikalson 1975).

Athens' numerous festivals often included musical, dramatic, and athletic competitions as well as torch races and more obscure contests.¹⁴ Credited to Theseus (Plut. *Thes.* 23.2), the Oschophoria had a ritual race by 20 youths (two from each of the ten tribes) bearing vine branches from the Temple of Dionysos to Phaleron and competing for a drink called the "fivefold" (*pentaploa*) (Kadletz 1980; Rutherford and Irvine 1988). The Choes festival to Dionysos included public wine drinking contests; the victor won a crown and a symbolic but redundant prize—a sack of wine (Ar. *Ach.* 1000–2, 1224–5; Hamilton 1992, 10–26). Adding to Athens' torch races, the Bendideia to the Thracian goddess Bendis, introduced in 429 (Pl. *Resp.* 1.328a), featured evening torch races on horseback.

Athens developed a policy of adapting and redirecting lesser and local cults to give them a civic focus and appeal. The tyrant Peisistratos probably reformed the Olympieia, the festival of Olympian Zeus, which by the fourth century was especially the festival of the cavalry and included an *anthippasia* contest. Athletic contests in the Herakleia at Marathon and the Eleusinia at Eleusis, both at the limits of Athenian territory, also became centralized under Athenian administration.

The policy also applied to a continuing tradition of games associated with funerary and hero cults. In the fifth century (probably from 479), the Epitaphia included public funeral games for Athens' war dead. Pericles probably gave his oration at this festival. Ancient sources (Lys. *Epitaphios* 2.80; Pl. *Menex.* 249b; Dem. 60.36) say the Epitaphia included "games of strength, knowledge, and wealth"—probably gymnastic, musical, and hippic contests. Similarly, the Theseia probably was influenced by athletic precursors associated with a hero cult, and the state incorporated this cult into the civic festival calendar, probably through the initiative of Kimon c. 470 (see n. 20).

Athens' expanding athletic programs created a need for facilities for both practice and competition to supplement the use of naturally suitable sites (Kyle 1987, 56–101). Athletic contests perhaps originally took place in various locations, for example, in the Archaic Agora northeast of the

Acropolis, and the sixth-century inscriptions (noted on p. 3 earlier) referring to a racecourse (*dromos*) may apply to that Archaic Agora. The area of the Classical Agora perhaps was first used for contests under the tyranny¹⁵. Postholes found in the northern Agora perhaps were for spectator stands, which appear in Athenian vase paintings (see [Figure 3.1](#)). Although occasional and informal, use of the Agora in festivals symbolizes the integration of athletics, religion, and civic life. For example, the Panathenaic Way itself, running through the Agora, was used as the route for torch races and equestrian events including the *apobates*. First mentioned by Xenophon (*Eq. mag.* 3.10), a hippodrome to the south of the city near Phaleron housed most equestrian contests and also cavalry events such as the *anthippasia*.

Athens was exceptional in having three major gymnasia, the Academy, Lyceum, and Kynosarges. These developed from prearchitectural suburban locations into simple architectural arrangements, at first probably just areas delineated by markers or walls, with limited facilities for exercise and bathing. Used for practice rather than contests, for track and field as well as combat sports, the Classical gymnasium was a large rectangular facility with an open central court, running tracks, and colonnades on all four sides. Athens also had many smaller *palaistrai* (wrestling schools), and the state legally regulated both gymnasia and *palaistrai* to some degree.

Many factors influenced the growth and character of Athens' facilities: the expansion of athletics and festivals, the fashion of nudity, socio-economic changes, and the political ambitions and patronage of tyrants and generals. For example, the fifth-century general Kimon used his private wealth to beautify Athens' recreational areas (Plut. *Cim.* 13.7). He planted plane trees for shade in the Agora, and he embellished the formerly modest Academy with hydraulics, shade trees, and running tracks. In the fourth century, the rise of schools of philosophy in association with gymnasia, notably Plato's teaching at the Academy, indicates that gymnasia were developing functionally as athletic, social, and educational centers. The Lyceum soon became the site of Aristotle's school, and it was enhanced, possibly to accommodate increasing functions. By Hellenistic times, Athens' gymnasia were architectural complexes and indispensable components in the physical form of Athens as a center of sport and intellectual life.

In the second half of the fourth century, Athens' facilities for competitions gained monumental stature, especially through projects overseen by Lycurgus. Modest arrangements had sufficed earlier, but in the later fourth century, most athletic events moved to the new Panathenaic Stadium. As at Nemea, Olympia, and Epidauros, the Lycurgan construction of the Panathenaic Stadium (with embankments for perhaps 50,000 spectators, a vaulted tunnel, and probably a dressing room) reflects a trend to specialized facilities with more spectacular elements. Although Lycurgus aimed at the glory of Periclean Athens, his administration and the design of an architectural

complex anticipated Hellenistic developments. Later still, in yet another benefaction, Herodes Atticus embellished this stadium with stone in the second century CE, and some remains were incorporated into the stadium constructed for the 1896 Olympics (Tobin 1993; Miller 2001, 210–22).

The Sociopolitical History of Athenian Sport

Sport in Archaic and Classical Athens was a public, highly contested realm of social and political ambitions. Early groups and leaders appreciated that victory at home or at major games abroad brought public recognition and status validation, but over time, there were dramatic social and economic changes as Athens became more wealthy, populous, and democratic. Increased meritocracy in sport (fair access and judging based on athletic merit) and increased democratization (popular sovereignty and broader political participation) expanded sporting activity in popular public performances.¹⁶ Local gymnasia provided prestigious, high-profile forums for sociopolitical display, and political leaders patronized and administered games, facilities, and rewards as political capital to promote themselves and their agendas.

Archaic Athens: politics and sport

Early athletic contests at Athens perhaps evolved from funeral games and cults of the heroized dead to festivals honoring major deities, and various local cult festivals probably included footraces and dancing associated with the seasons, fertility, or rites of passage. Athens had fared better than most areas in the Dark Age, so local athletic and aristocratic traditions were old and strong. Early Athenian aristocrats, in rival baronial families, probably enjoyed Homeric-style athletics locally throughout Attica with funeral games and material prizes. The earliest indications of Athenian athletics come from Geometric vases with scenes of boxers or chariots, which possibly were elements of funeral games (Thompson 1961). Clearer evidence appears in the seventh century, when both Athens and athletics were gaining more prominence.

Seventh-century Athens knew sporting rivalries and political tensions largely within the aristocratic class, as noble families strove for honor and influence. They probably competed in local games, but their main focus, consistent with the ideology of building prestige and networks beyond their *polis*, was on games outside of Athens. Competition at elaborate funeral games and at Olympia affirmed social status. Of Athens' first Olympic victor, Pantakles in 696, we know only that he was a sprinter, but Athenian victors at major games abroad probably were from wealthy, politically active, aristocratic families.¹⁷ Phrynon, the Olympic *pankration* victor in 636, was probably the same Phrynon who became a general and a founder of colonies. Kylon, the rich

son-in-law of the tyrant of Megara, won the Olympic *diaulos* in 640 and later made an ill-fated attempt to become a tyrant at Athens.

Early in the sixth century, the Athenian statesman Solon enacted political reforms making wealth, rather than birth, the basis for eligibility to hold high office; and his reform of the popular assembly and courts, along with his economic policies, increased sociopolitical access and mobility for many Athenians. He also legislated monetary rewards for Athenian victors in Panhellenic athletic contests: 500 *drachmai* for an Olympic victory—estimated by D. Young (2004, 98; cf. his earlier calculations 1984, 128–33) as equivalent to *c.* \$700,000—and 100 *drachmai* for an Isthmian victory. Solon wanted to encourage Athenians to see athletics, like politics, as a civic and not a private matter (Kyle 1984; cf. Mann 2001, 70–81).

In the 560s, amidst increasingly virulent political factionalism, some leader or group in Athens opportunistically promoted the Panathenaia as a forum for ceremony, competition, and recreation. Unfortunately, as noted earlier, the sources are too scanty to be certain about who was responsible for what innovations (Kyle 1987, 22–31; Anderson 2003, 67–76; Neils 2007).

The tyranny and the Panathenaia

Shortly after the Greater Panathenaia began in 566, the disrupted but long tyranny of Peisistratos and his sons Hippias and Hipparchos (561...510) promoted civic athletics and the Panathenaia. Peisistratos reinforced his position by fostering the anti-clan, patriotic influence of civic athletics to counter divisive regional loyalties in Attica. He saw the value of athletics for promoting Athens, pleasing the people, dissipating aristocratic energies, and augmenting the cult of the patron goddess Athena.

The tyrants were civic boosters who sought popular support through public projects and entertainments. They are associated with embellishing the Panathenaic Way and holding contests in the Agora. Hipparchos is credited with a costly wall around the Academy gymnasium, within which Peisistratos dedicated an altar to Eros. The Peisistratids actively sponsored the Panathenaic festival and its contests, and they are associated with changes in the Panathenaic program, including the establishment of the Panathenaic contest in rhapsodic recitations of Homer. Hippias was organizing the Panathenaic procession when Hipparchos was assassinated in 514 (Thuc. 6.57; Hdt. 5.56; Phillips 2003, 204–8). By the end of the tyranny, various lesser and local cults and festivals had been nationalized, and the Panathenaia had an athletic program at least as extensive as that at Olympia.

Like most tyrants, Peisistratos drove other aristocrats out of Athens, allowing some to return only through their concessions to his power. Hardly idle, notable families still publicized themselves as victors and patrons. When Kimon (I), son of Stesagoras (not to be confused with the fifth-century general

Kimon mentioned above), a member of a wealthy and powerful Athenian family, won his second Olympic victory in the four-horse chariot race in 532, he had Peisistratos declared the official victor. The tyrant enjoyed the prestige of being an Olympic victor, and he let Kimon return to Athens from exile (Hdt. 6.103). When Kimon won a third time, in 528, however, he was killed at Athens, arguably because Peisistratos' sons resented his high profile (Kyle 1987, 111–12, 158; Papakonstantinou 2013, 99–103).

After Spartan military intervention ended the Peisistratid tyranny in 510, the Athenian citizenry rejected a Spartan-backed conservative regime. In 508, a reformer named Kleisthenes established a more egalitarian and democratic sociopolitical system by creating ten new tribes as basic subdivisions of the citizenry. An aristocrat from a horse-racing family, Kleisthenes understood the political value of sport, and scholars associate the institution or expansion of tribal contests at the Panathenaic Games with Kleisthenes' reforms.¹⁸ Tribal team activities helped promote broader participation in sport as well as stronger bonds among Athenians and their tribes across Attica.

Classical Athens

Fifth-century Athenian sport history unfolded in the context of a lengthy military conflict between Athens and Persia, in which Athens' success was initially derived from the skill of its infantrymen, who typically came from relatively well-off families. Soon, however, Athens came to depend more on its navy, which was manned largely by rowers from poorer families. As Athens became more affluent, meritocratic, and democratic, emerging groups emulated the sporting pastimes of the privileged classes, competing in gymnastic and tribal events, and exercising nude in the gymnasia. Some of these new athletes seem to have come from wealthy but nonaristocratic families (Kyle 1987, 113–19). Kallias, son of Didymias (not to be confused with a contemporaneous homonymous aristocratic victor in Olympic and Delphic hippic events) won the *pankration* at Olympia in 472, as well as at Isthmia, Nemea, and Delphi, and also in the Panathenaia (Kyle 1987, 184, 202–3, no. A29). The only known only pre-Hellenistic *periodonikes* (victor at all of the four sites of the *periodos*), this Kallias did not come from an aristocratic clan and may later have actively opposed Pericles, for he seems to have been in danger of being ostracized (Kyle 1987, 161).¹⁹ Another pankratiast, Autolykos was a young Panathenaic victor in 421/0, and his father Lykon was conspicuous and reasonably wealthy but not from an aristocratic clan (Kyle 1987, 114, 117, 161). Xenophon (*Symp.* 1.8–9) praises Autolykos for his beauty and good character, and the wealthy citizen Kallias (III) (descendant of the earlier horse-racing Kallias I), enamored of the youth, took him after his victory to the horse races “to see the spectacle” before hosting a symposium in his honor (Xen. *Symp.* 1.2). Years later, the oppressive regime of the Thirty Tyrants put Autolykos to death (Plut. *Lys.* 15.5).

As Athens' democracy strengthened, aspiring statesmen tended to avoid demanding personal gymnastic competition as a means to public exposure and influence. Instead, they approached athletics indirectly as benefactors. Recognizing the political value of fostering games for their careers, for social order and civic consciousness, and also for military preparedness on land and at sea, generals such as Kimon and Pericles dispensed popular patronage and expanded opportunities and facilities for leisure and sport. As noted earlier, Kimon (c. 510–450, a descendant of the sixth-century Kimon (I) mentioned earlier) used his private wealth to beautify Athens' recreational areas, planting shade trees in the Agora, and embellishing the Academy gymnasium (Plut. *Cim.* 13.7; Kyle 1987, 73–4).²⁰

Kimon's rival Pericles (c. 495–429) made Athens even more democratic when he came to power. Using public funds, he actively promoted festivals and contests. Plutarch (*Per.* 11.4) says he pleased the people by always arranging some show (*tina thean*), feast, or procession, amusing them with childish delights. During his long career, he expanded tribal military events (e.g., pyrrhic, cavalry, and boat contests). In 442, he was an *athlothes* (one of the officials who organized the Panathenaic festival), and he probably built the Odeion in the Agora as a venue for musical contests around that time (Plut. *Per.* 13.5). He also apparently was responsible for a renovation of the Lyceum gymnasium and for the renewal of *sitesis*—the practice of awarding of a free meal daily in the town hall to Athenian Panhellenic victors (*IG* I³ 131; Kyle 1987, 79, 145–7).

Alcibiades, Pericles' ambitious and flamboyant ward, having married into the hippotrophic family of Kallias II (and probably having won a Panathenaic victory in 418; see Kyle 1987, 195–6), sought a quick and easy route to power. To that end, he went to Olympia in 416 seeking fame.²¹ Entering seven chariots, including one paid for by a fellow citizen (Diomedes or Tisias), Alcibiades placed first, second, and (third or) fourth, and he made himself a center of attention. Although a private individual, he accepted gifts at Olympia as if he was a head of state. The Ephesians provided him with a large tent (twice as large as that of Athens' delegation; Ps.-Andoc. 4.30), Chios provided fodder for his horses and beasts for sacrifice, and Lesbos gave food and wine for a celebration (Plut. *Alc.* 12.1). And celebrate he did. He threw an extravagant party with a huge feast with roast meat (Isoc. 16.34; Ath. 1.3e), and the next day, he improperly used sacred vessels of the Athenian delegation in a sacrifice as if he owned them personally (Ps.-Andoc. 4.29). His extravagant socializing at Olympia incited controversy back in Athens.²² Returning home, Alcibiades promoted his fame beyond any Pindaric sense of modesty (see [Chapter 10](#)). His self-advertisement included a commissioned victory ode, apparently by Euripides (Eur. *apud* Plut. *Alc.* 11, frag. 755 Page *PMG*).²³

Ultimately, Alcibiades' antics brought him disfavor and exile, but in the short

term, he effectively used his Olympic excess to political advantage.²⁴ In his speech encouraging the Athenians to invade Sicily in 415, Alcibiades boasted that his Olympic success conveyed honor and power, for which Athens should be grateful (Thuc. 6.16.2; see Kurke 1991, 171–3, 176–7). An Olympic victor only by means of wealth, he nonetheless declared himself superior to his fellow citizens, who then approved his plans for the ultimately disastrous Sicilian expedition.

After the Peloponnesian War (431–404), Athens' athletic program continued and probably expanded, but the realms of personal athletics and political leadership diverged. We know of several fourth-century Athenian athletes, especially in running and combat sports; some seem to be from recently wealthy families, while the backgrounds of others are obscure. The career of Dioxippos, an Olympic *pankration* victor who accompanied Alexander the Great on campaign (Kyle 1987, 119–20, 150–1; see [Chapter 12](#)), and the accusation of bribery at Olympia against the pentathlete Kallippos in 322 (Kyle 1987, 119–20), may indicate that financial professionalism was not far off. Competition seems to have become a personal matter of status display, and gymnasia increasingly involved educational and military training.

Contestation, Critics, and Popular Attitudes

High-profile athletes and expanding athletic programs and access potentially could have unifying or destabilizing influences in Greek city-states. Scholars using approaches from social history and sport sociology, as well as New Historicism, often see sport as fraught with social dissent, contestation, and conflict.²⁵ For example, M. Golden interprets Greek sport in general as a realm of social differentiation, and concerning Athens, he suggests tensions and divisiveness between dominant and emerging classes, between hippic and gymnastic competition, and between conservative and democratic agendas. He uses literary texts and *ostraka* with critical comments (Brenne 1994, 15–20) to argue that lesser Athenians resented elite athletes and rejected hippotrophy as antidemocratic.²⁶

Similarly, Z. Papakonstantinou (2003), using critical rhetorical comments, often from the questionable Ps.-Andocides (4, *Against Alcibiades*), suggests that the comments about Alcibiades' career show ideological tensions (“oppositional discourses of ideological appropriation,” 173) across socio-economic class lines, or between “the rich and the few” and “the poor and the many” in Athenian political parlance.

Certainly, Alcibiades was a controversial Olympic victor and political figure, and fifth-century democratic Athens was in flux. With democracy and empire, new groups were taking up regular gymnastic exercise and political involvement, and more traditional groups had to give way. Rhetorical comments and a few references to hippotrophy on *ostraka*, however, do not

prove that most Athenians rejected hippotrophy as antidemocratic or that there was a protracted ideological controversy concerning sport. Perhaps there was some social tension between the aristocratic horsey class and the more democratic gymnastic class, but diverse sporting achievements can be an integrative source of patriotic pride. Euripides apparently did not refuse a commission to write a victory ode for Alcibiades, and Alcibiades' appeal to his chariot success was politically effective in 415.

Other scholars (e.g., Kyle 1987; Lee 2003) feel sport was a positive integrating factor promoting civic consciousness and social order.²⁷ P. Christesen (2012, 135–63, 2014) sees some level of potential conflict as inherent in society, but he asserts a positive reciprocal relationship among meritocracy, sport, and democratization: sport assisted the functioning of society through socialization, the reinforcement of proper social relations, and consensus among groups.

The “anomaly” of mass support for athletics?

To explain what he sees as enthusiastic but anomalous lower-class support for elite athletics, from which the masses themselves were excluded (see [Chapter 10](#)), D.M. Pritchard (2013, 84–138) discusses popular culture and popular attitudes about athletics as reflected in Old Comedy and speeches. He asserts that even though athletics were the preserve of the wealthy and privileged (see his [Chapters 2](#) and [10](#)), the masses were very supportive—emotionally and financially—of athletes and athletics. Although popular opinion—especially the popular medium of Old Comedy—might be critical of other elite practices (e.g., equestrian pursuits, symposia, pederasty, political leadership), the lower-class citizens consistently supported athletics and respected athletes. Despite the rewards and privileges given to gymnastic athletes, nonelite Athenians identified with and supported them.

Pritchard credits this anomalous popular support for elite athletics to the “democratization” of warfare—the decline of the Archaic elite’s domination of military matters, and the emergence first of the “hoplite” infantry class, and later of the lower classes in the navy. He says that, paradoxically, the nonelite masses serving in the navy, contributing physically and militarily to the state, associated themselves ideologically with the militaristic and agonistic virtues (e.g., training, effort, or toils (*ponoi*), risks or dangers (*kindunai*), and excellence (*arete*) traditionally ascribed to the higher classes). Lower-class rowers supported expensive and elitist activities because of a common athletic and military culture, an ideological compatibility, between Athens’ gymnastic athletes and hoplite warriors (Pritchard 2010, 2013, 164–208).

Ironically but significantly, Pritchard and Christesen disagree about popular access to athletic involvement, but they agree that sport assisted social order in democratic Athens, either by shared ideology or “democratization.” Debate

continues on such issues in general, but it tends to return to Athens and so-called critics of sport.

Critics and criticisms

Pindar and others praised and even heroized athletes, but sport was not without its dissenters who challenged the value of athletics for the welfare of the state, for warfare, and even for the health of the athletes themselves.²⁸ Such discourse continued in Greek literature from Homer (see [Chapter 3](#)) to Greek authors of the Roman Imperial age and beyond.²⁹

Early non-Athenian critics of athletics established soon-to-be conventional literary motifs (*topoi*). Tyrtaios praised soldier-citizens above athletes (see [Chapter 9](#)), and Xenophanes criticized the custom of rewarding athletic victors (both gymnastic and hippic) rather than intellectuals (*sophoi*) and good citizens who assist the good order and economy of the city (see [Chapter 4](#)). Notable Athenian criticisms appear in the last third of the fifth century in the context of the Peloponnesian War.³⁰ Earlier protests against the popular adulation of athletes were expanded with criticisms of excessive training, eating habits (i.e., gluttony), overspecialization, lack of “life skills,” and the supposed decline of physical education.³¹

Exaggerating for comedic effect, Aristophanes’ *Clouds* (1002–23) has an arch conservative, the Just Logos, lament that the younger generation—no longer fit, trained, or modest—prefer the courts and baths to the gymnasia.

Aristophanes’ characters (*Nub.* 988–9; *Ran.* 1087–8) complain that effete Athenian youths now cover themselves with their shields and perform the pyrrhic dance poorly, and that out-of-shape torch runners plod through the Agora. To incite laughter, Aristophanes charges that the sophistic “New Education” was undermining the physical and moral worth of citizens, but gymnastic education did not cease, nor were the gymnasia and wrestling schools empty. The fact that such charges were included in comedies, which, like tragedies, abundantly used athletic terminology and metaphors (Larmour 1999), shows that audiences were athletically knowledgeable.

In a fragment of a satyr play (a burlesque piece presented after tragedies for comic relief) of c. 420 supposedly by Euripides (Ath. 10.413f = *Autolykos* frag. 282; trans. Miller 2012, no. 230), a speaker lampoons athletes as uncouth, muscle-bound, militarily useless, and socially parasitical gluttons, who were overly flattered and pretty in their youth but quite unprepared to be useful citizens:

Of the thousands of evils which exist in Greece there is no greater evil than the race of athletes. In the first place, they are incapable of living, or of learning to live, properly. How can a man who is a slave to his jaws and a

servant to his belly acquire more wealth than his father? Moreover, these athletes cannot bear poverty nor be of service to their own fortunes. Since they have not formed good habits, they face problems with difficulty. ... For this I blame the customs of the Greeks who assemble to watch athletes and thus honor useless pleasures in order to have an excuse for a feast. What man has ever defended the city of his fathers by winning a crown for wrestling

Like Xenophanes, this fragment seems to indict general Greek, not specifically Athenian, customs. By this time, such literary conventions included the athlete as a physical caricature, someone suffering from an imbalance of physical and intellectual development—a theme sustained by intellectuals later.³²

Pritchard (2012a, 2013, 139–56), discussing the *Autolykos*, ingeniously reinterprets the prominence of athletics and the frequency of encounters between satyrs and athletes in satyr plays: given the admiration for athletes in popular media, and the satyrs' lack of the virtues and morality of athletes, any satyr's attempt to appear athletic must fail, inciting humor and ridicule. He takes the passage as a satyric character's exaggerated rant against athletes, which only increases the audience's dislike for the ridiculous speaker.

Writers chose critical or laudatory commonplaces depending on the context and the nature of the work being written. Euripides apparently praises Alcibiades in one literary genre and mocks athletic victors in another. Even Isokrates commented inconsistently on victors and rewards (Kyle 1987, 134–7).

In an anonymous prose work by a conservative critical of developments in Athens,³³ perhaps directed at Pericles' policies, the "Old Oligarch" complains that the poor enjoy festivals and contests paid for by rich (i.e., via liturgies). He charges that Athens' athletically inept masses were intruding on the aristocrats' traditional sporting activities, that the masses wanted frequent festivals and sacrifices with meat distributions, and that greed moved them to participate locally in team singing, running, and dancing contests ([Xen.]*Ath.pol.* 1.13, 2.9). He objects not to athletics or festivals *per se* but to liturgical contributions and nonaristocratic participation. He also suggests (2.10) that while some wealthy people have private sports facilities, commoners have built more public facilities, which they use more than the wealthy do.

Perhaps the motives of all competitors and spectators were not always noble. As well as an athletic spectacle and a forum for piety and patriotism, athletic festivals meant a rare meat meal for many and the chance of aggrandizement for a few. Aristophanes' *Wealth* (1161–3) states that Ploutos, Greek god of wealth, was highly sympathetic to musical and gymnastic contests. (Recall Euripides' claim that spectators gather at festivals to have an excuse for a

feast.) Sacrificial meat was distributed at the Panathenaia, and Aristophanes (*Nub.* 386–7) connects the festival with overeating and the resulting stomach discomfort.

The Old Oligarch criticizes much about imperial, democratic Athens, but he also grudgingly concedes that the people had the power to get what they wanted and that oligarchic disagreement mattered little. Social critics also censured many of Athens' significant and popular institutions—its politics, courts, and empire. Criticisms of sport themselves testify to the spread and popularity of civic athletics.

Actions spoke louder than words, and the people spoke legislatively through the Assembly. The continued growth of games, prizes, and facilities suggests broad approval of sport of all kinds. Athenian religion saw the Panathenaic festival as necessary for keeping Athena's divine favor for the city, but the maintenance of elaborate, expensive games—even in times of stress—indicates popular enthusiasm. As noted, the Assembly renewed athletic *sitesis* (for gymnastic and hippic victors) in Periclean Athens as a gesture of communal appreciation for accomplishments that aided both citizen and state: a civic gift was given for a civic benefaction. Socrates was certainly aware of that tradition.

On trial in 399, Plato's Socrates (*Ap.* 36d-e) compared his worth to the city to that of Olympic equestrian victors, contending that he deserved and needed *sitesis* more than rich hippic victors. J. Harris (2009) compares Socrates' comments to those of Xenophanes and Euripides (i.e., the *topos* that that victors do not make the state better morally or materially), and he explains that Socrates does not claim to have *sophia* (in the sense of divine wisdom or expertise), which the sophists falsely profess. Rather Socrates' wisdom consists of knowing that he lacks wisdom. He argues that his divine mission to perform self-examination, and to inspire others to seek wisdom in themselves and to reject the pretensions of the sophists, is a public benefaction that fully occupies and impoverishes him. He therefore insists that he is more worthy of civic recognition in the form of *sitesis* than the civically useless hippic victors who do not need public support (*Ap.* 36c2–3, d4–5).

Note that (Plato via) Socrates does not criticize existing rewards for gymnastic victors; perhaps he identifies with their middling social level (Miller 2004, 234), or he appreciates their effort (*ponos*) and excellence (*arete*) in achieving victory. Rather he specifies Olympic victors with expensive entries—teams of horses (a *synoris* or a *zeugos*), but not the less costly horse race (*keles*). The omission of gymnastic athletes and the emphasis on Olympic hippic victors, who usually did not even drive their teams but used hired or slave drivers, brings Alcibiades to mind. He expended wealth but not physical agony to win (his *epinikion* says he won “without toil,” another *topos*; see [Chapter 9](#)), and he misled and destabilized the state.

Ancient voices criticizing athletics have a disturbingly modern ring to them, but historically, they represent at best an ineffectual minority viewpoint. Modern editorials decry high salaries and steroids in sports, but society at large has hardly rejected athletics. Representing popular opinion, the mass jury of common Athenians ultimately condemned Socrates to death and kept honoring victors and attending the games.

Athens, Athenians, and athletics

Sport and politics at times perhaps were realms of social differentiation and contestation at Athens, and to some degree, there were tensions and negotiations as athletic programs and participation grew, but overall Athens' sport—especially at the Greater Panathenaia—was a positive, unifying factor in Athenian society. Athens' games and processions offered a chance for every Athenian—and many non-Athenians—to share in the experience. Participation at even the humblest spectator level gave a sense of involvement in the games and the communal celebration. On the whole, rich and poor fellow Athenians cherished their games and applauded and rewarded their state's victories in any event.

Not without tension but generally in a positive way, the shared experiences of competing and spectating at athletic festivals (re)formed the Athenian community, communicating and reinforcing—or at times contesting—sociopolitical values and order.³⁴ The growth of sport pleased the citizens, trumpeted the fame of Athens, and encouraged civic harmony and pride.

Athens expended great wealth and administrative effort on preparations and prizes because the festivals, athletes, diverse contests, and rich prizes inspired civic pride and promoted the state as a political community. The spectacular events were essential rituals of democratic Athens. Athenians as victors, benefactors, and spectators gained glory, recognition, pride, or pleasure, and the state benefited from an enhanced civic consciousness.

Proto-Hellenistic trends

After the Peloponnesian War, Athens revived economically but never recovered its leadership of the Greek world. Although resources were scarce, athletic programs expanded and participation continued. In the second half of the fourth century, Athens flourished for a time under Lycurgus but ultimately fell to Macedon. Rather than as a time of degeneration from classical norms, this era is best seen as proto-Hellenistic in terms of athletics. As a major part of civic life, athletics still were carefully administered, as Aristotle details (*Ath. Pol.* 60.1, 62.2); and athletics increasingly involved educational and military training as preparation for citizenship. The development of the *ephebeia* under Lycurgus (*Ath. Pol.* 42) led to an expanded Theseia, and military and cavalry influences were reflected in festivals like the Olympieia

to Zeus.

Altered but active, athletics remained a vital part of the glory, identity, and legacy of Athens. Athletic facilities became grander, programs remained elaborate, and games and prizes were maintained as expressions of Athenian pride in the past glories and present beauties of the city. Ironically, the fame and allure of Athenian athletics fared better than the city itself. Sport remained conspicuous in Athens' calendar, topography, and identity even as its political and military prominence was eclipsed in Hellenistic Greece.

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Notes

- 1 Relevant studies include Kyle (1987, 1992, 1996, 2014); Tracy (1991); Neils (1992, 1994, 1996a, 1996b); Miller (2004, 132–45); Christesen (2012, 145–51, 164–78); Pritchard (2003, 2010, 2013); Valavanis (2004, 336–91).
- 2 Neils (1992, 29–51, 1996b, 95–174); Bentz (1998).
- 3 Miller (2012, 83), conservatively estimates \$39,600 for 100 amphoras, but now see Shear (2003b, 105), who restores the men's *stadion* prize at 80 amphoras, which via Young's (1984) system would be \$108,480.
- 4 See Pritchard (2012b, 23–32), on the cost of the Greater Panathenaia.
- 5 On the events, see Johnson (1987); Kyle (1987, 178–94), (1992, 82–97), (2014, 161–5); Neils (1992, 14–17); Bentz (1998, 11–22); Shear (2003a, 2003b).
- 6 A fourth-century base from the Agora with a relief of the race held a dedication by a Panathenaic victor (Agora Museum S399, Inv. no. 8114).
- 7 In the late fifth century, a man claims he spent 800 drachmas on the pyrrhic for the Greater Panathenaia and 700 on a boys' pyrrhic chorus for the lesser festival (*Lys.* 21.1,4).
- 8 Shear (2003a) dates the original base to 323/2 but identifies a reworking and a second phase within the next year.
- 9 On the *anthippasia*, see Kyle (1987, 189–90); Camp (1998, 28–33). On cyclic choruses, see Goette (2007, 117, 122–3).
- 10 Kavoulaki (1999, 294–7) explains that processions, as “viewing occasions,” included physical performative movement, a special occasion, an audience, and self-conscious, interactive performance and viewing.
- 11 On the procession, see Neils (1996a). On the frieze, see Neils (2001); Stevenson (2003).
- 12 Neils (2012) suggests that the procession as represented in the Parthenon frieze reflects diachronic changes: the importance of the cavalry (recently reformed and expanded by Pericles; see Neils (2001, 132–7), the possible addition of the *apobates* race, and the importance of the tribal contests. Such changes helped consolidate the Athenian community and legitimize Pericles' policies and ideology of democracy and power.
- 13 Yet Pritchard (2012b) shows that Athens spent more on war than on festivals.
- 14 See the table of festivals in Osborne (1993, 38).

- 15 Stone bases (with sockets for posts) found in the northern part of the Agora near the Altar of the Twelve Gods have been interpreted as fifth-century starting line for footraces (Kyle 1987, 60–1), but they may instead be part of a fenced enclosure.
- 16 On the social status of Greek athletes in general, see Chapter 10.
- 17 For a catalog of Athenian athletes, see Kyle (1987, 102–23, 195–228).
- 18 Neils (1994); Anderson (2003, 158–77); Fisher (2011, 179–82).
- 19 A dedication of the second half of the fifth century records Nemean, Isthmian, and Panathenaic wins (probably in chariot races) by one Pronapes, who possibly was a cavalry commander and one of the prosecutors of Themistokles; Kyle (1987, 210), no. A57.
- 20 Also, *c.* 469 Kimon returned the supposed “bones of Theseus” from Skyros to Athens (Plut. *Thes.* 36.1–2) and apparently fostered the Theseia, which, Plutarch (*Cim.* 8.6) says, increased his popularity with the people.
- 21 Alcibiades was a gymnasiarch (at that time an Athenian appointed to put on torch races), and he was involved in legislation regarding Kynosarges: Isoc. 16.35; Ath.234e; *IG I³* 134; Pritchard (2009, 213).
- 22 Golden (1998, 169–71); Papakonstantinou (2003); Bell (2004, 84–99); Gribble (2012).
- 23 See Bowra (1960). Gribble (2012, 65–7) has doubts about the general ascription to Euripides (cf. Plut. *Dem.* 1.1) and about the poem’s performance context and message.
- 24 Gribble (2012) relates Alcibiades’ actions and words to his rivalry with Nikias in making spectacular expenditures. He suggests Alcibiades’ Olympic win, spending, and display influenced Athens–Sparta relations, the Sicilian Expedition, and possibly the ostracism of Hyperbolos.
- 25 For example, Kurke (1991) and Nicholson (2005) use Pindar and other sources to assert social tensions, discourse, and class struggle in Late Archaic and Early Classical Greece. They suggest that, from a threatened conservative perspective, increased access and meritocratic sport were making athletic success a teachable, transportable, acquired, and non-innate skill in a new age of commodity exchange. Further on sport sociological approaches, see Hubbard (2008); Christesen (2012, 119–83).
- 26 Golden (1997, 1998, 157–75, 2008, 1–39); similarly Mann (2001).
- 27 Reviewing Golden (1998), Lee (2003, 401–2) agrees that social historical approaches are relevant but “...even as sport can assert or reinforce differences, it can also promote a discourse of unity. The wonder of Greek

sport is that it somehow forged divergent social classes and quarrelsome city-states into a Pan-Hellenic community, which fostered and celebrated athletic *arete*.”

- 28 Finley and Pleket (1976, 113–27); Kyle (1987, 124–54); Harris (2009, 158–63).
- 29 On later debates about athletics, notably in Galen and Philostratos, see König (2005, 254–344); Newby (2005, 143–67); Papakonstantinou (2014, 327–8).
- 30 Papakonstantinou (2014, 323–6) feels that various Athenian authors saw overspecialized athletes as dysfunctional citizens incapable of contributing to the community.
- 31 Kyle (1987, 124–41, 152–4); Tarrant (2003); Harris (2009).
- 32 For example, Plato (*Resp.* 3.404a) and Aristotle (*Pol.* 1335b) felt that excessive training was unnatural and unhealthy. Tarrant (2003) suggests intellectuals privileged intellectual health above physical health, and put well-educated and well-rounded citizens above athletes in their worth to the state.
- 33 Erroneously ascribed to Xenophon, the treatise sometimes appears in modern publications of his work.
- 34 See König (2009, 379–85) on spectatorship and festivals as representations of community.

Spartan Sport and Physical Education

Lycurgus exercised the bodies of the virgins with footraces and wrestling and throwing the diskos and akon [javelin] so that their offspring might grow forth from strong roots in strong bodies, and so that they might be patient and strong in childbirth and struggle well and easily with its pains.

Plutarch, *Lycurgus* 14.2, trans. Miller 2012, no. 153

“Sparta” evokes images of a xenophobic and totalitarian state, the bristling warrior society of Leonidas, the hero of Thermopylae. Sparta so fascinated ancient writers and philosophers that an ancient Spartan mirage developed, which has inspired modern utopian and dystopian visions of either a perfect, ordered, moral society or a mechanical state—dependent on dehumanizing behavioral conditioning. Did Sparta have a sense of true sport—of voluntary, unpredictable free competition—or did Sparta’s arduous system of male (and female) physical education produce tough automatons, rather like the West’s perception of Soviet athletes a few decades ago? Were Spartans physically impressive athletes but by means of a ruthless perversion of sport?

Recent scholarship suggests that Classical Spartan sport and physical education were not so strange after all.¹ The Spartans had performative spectacles at home, including contests and rites of passage for young males and females, and they caught the eye of other Greeks with victories and monuments at external games. Modern ideological preferences for Athens or Sparta have obscured the reality that the two most famous Greek states were not so dissimilar in terms of sport and spectacle.

Ancients claimed that Sparta acquired “good order” (*eunomia*) thanks to Lycurgus, a semilegendary Spartan lawgiver, but Plutarch (*Lyc.* 1.1) admits that nothing about him is beyond dispute. Instead, modern historians see the “Spartan Revolution” as a process, a series of stages, due to historical exigencies (e.g., wars with neighboring peoples, transitioning to hoplite warfare). We now tend to down date Sparta’s distinctiveness, and the institutionalization of its social system, ethnocentrism, and austerity, to the sixth century. Early Sparta, in fact, was cultured and well connected, innovative in physical education, and regularly successful in external games. Also, rather than remaining a monolithic, static society, as Cicero claims (*Pro Flac.* 26.63), fifth-century Sparta experienced social change and even a dramatic social (and military) “crisis” (Kennell 1995; Powell and Hodkinson 2002).

Problematic Evidence

Spartan sport history entails problems of evidence, perspective, and chronology. Inscriptions, dedications, and archaeology help, but the laconic Spartans left so little self-testimony in literature that we turn to external authors. Sparta had an ancient reputation for toughness of body and spirit, competitiveness, discipline, and determination, and for male and female nude physical exercise and parades, but few non-Spartans were witnesses.

Early poetry, like that of Tyrtaios, articulates a militaristic ideology but provides little detailed information. Non-Spartan literary sources include contemporary but biased Athenians, or much later authors prone to stereotyping. Herodotus notes a few items about sport in the context of Spartan political and military events, but Thucydides tends to exaggerate Sparta's national character to contrast it with Athens. Xenophon's *Spartan Constitution* of c. 375 is our earliest account of Spartan education, and his personal experience with Sparta adds to his credibility. Plato drew on Sparta in designing his ideal state, but it is unclear when he draws from history or reputation. Using Xenophon, Plutarch found the Spartans ideal for moralizing incidents and comments, especially in his *Lycurgus* and his *Spartan Sayings*. Pausanias writes of Sparta, and he noted Spartan monuments at Olympia, but the mirage was entrenched by his time. Much of the evidence concerns Roman Sparta, and the reliability of Hellenistic and Roman evidence for early practices is suspect. Later Sparta cultivated its own mythology, and outsiders creatively relished and embellished stories of Spartan heroism, sex, and violence.

Physical Education: Building the Body Politic

By the Classical Age, Sparta's educational system, its institutionalized "leading" or *agoge*, combined what we would call education, socialization, and indoctrination.² Its agenda included military preparedness, male initiation, and a program of eugenics with erotic inducements and prenuptial rituals. It also included contests and an extensive and intensive system of exercise and physical education for males and females of the Spartan citizen class, a small minority of the population. The largest and lowest class, the helots, perhaps had their own rustic recreations, but the history of Spartan sport is that of privileged citizens.

Scholars debate whether Sparta's system was highly innovative or whether it retained Dorian archaisms that other states had dropped.³ Scanlon (2002, 77–83) suggests Sparta's male physical culture, including its nudity and homoerotic aspects, had roots in Dorian Crete. Perhaps some early features were later ascribed to Lycurgus, but some aspects deriving from hoplite warfare post-date Lycurgus. N. Kennell (1995, 115–42) challenges the image of early Spartan education as a distinctively brutal and unchanging system of

severe and primitive customs. Arguing that what was distinctive was not very early, and what was early was not very distinctive, he approaches Archaic and Classical Sparta's *agoge* as an initiation process similar to those in other Greek cities (i.e., rites of passage with boys in age classes performing in games and combats). At most, sixth-century renovations of the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia suggest that Sparta was distinctively early in bringing such rites under state control.

Arguing that the famously extreme version of Sparta's educational system was not a Classical creation but a later retrojection, Kennell (1995, 5–27) suggests that many distinctive, archaizing features of the system were produced by third-century BCE reforms after Sparta's glory days were gone and missed. When Spartan power collapsed in the fourth century, early rites were abandoned, and King Kleomenes III (235–222 BCE) and his cultural adviser, the Stoic philosopher Sphaerus of Borysthenes, reinvented the *agoge*. Using a theme of revival, they remade the traditional coming-of-age rituals into a distinctive system of military and educational institutions for youths in age classes (from 14 to 20). Later, after leaving the Achaean League in 146 BCE, Sparta's system became even more anachronistic and severe. Manipulating its past, Sparta created an idealized cultural legacy to give itself a distinctive identity in the face of the homogenization of Greek culture under Rome.

The male system

Debate continues about details and stages, but Classical Sparta certainly made Spartan males undergo rigorous and protracted physical education in preparation for citizenship.⁴ Supervised by a state magistrate (*paidonomos*) who directed their education and discipline, from age seven on, boys were placed into “herds” (*agelai*) or age groupings (*paides* 7–14, *paidiskoi* 14–20, and *hebontes* 20–30), and they remained subject to older boys and the watchful eye of any adult. Underfed and ill clad, boys learned survival skills by scrambling for food and by eluding punishments. They engaged in exercises, contests, and violent games in the nude to develop their discipline and toughness (Xen. *Lac.* 2.1–11, 4.2–6; Plut. *Lyc.* 16.4–17.4). *Hebontes* joined the army and, once accepted, took their suppers with a dinner group (*syssition*) of 15–20 Spartans. Adult citizens also were expected to exercise regularly both in the gymnasium and on campaign (Xen. *Lac.* 5.8–9, 12.5–7). In this boys’ and men’s club, the intensification of masculinity, male bonding, and a “macho” mentality were pervasive, and the state encouraged homoerotic pederastic relationships.

Sparta turned early initiatory rituals into a state system of regular competitions and processional displays, assessing young men’s physical fitness by reviewing them nude. Aelian (*VH* 14.7) claims that Spartan youths had to present themselves nude for inspection by magistrates (the Ephors)

every ten days; fit boys were praised, and out-of-shape boys were flogged. Festivals to Apollo involved public reviews of fitness: the Gymnopaidiai had some form of nude male dancing in choruses (Pettersson 1992, 42–56; Ducat 2006, 265–74), the Hyakinthia included male choruses and perhaps athletic contests (Pettersson 1992, 9–41), and the Karneia had hippic and musical contests and footraces (Kennell 1995, 65–9; Miller 2004, 146).

Athens had team and tribal events (see [Chapter 8](#)), but Sparta escalated the violence of its team contests (Christesen 2012a, 201–3). In the *sphairomachia* or “ball battle,” teams of young men, who were becoming *hebontes*, honored Herakles by competing against each other in a rough contact game—battling with each other to control and advance a ball.⁵ Another rough team sport, also honoring Herakles, took place at the Platanistas (the plane-tree grove). Two teams of youths (also becoming *hebontes*) entered an island by separate bridges, and each tried to drive the opposing team off the island by pushing, kicking, biting, and gouging (Paus. 3.14.8–10).

A notorious contest honoring Artemis Orthia included the whipping of boys, but its most lurid features probably date to a later age. In the original ritual form, teams of boys (transitioning from *paidiskoi* to *hebontes*) tried to steal cheeses from the altar in the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia, and other youths with whips tried to prevent them, perhaps flogging those they caught.⁶ In the later form of the event in Roman times, nude boys competed to see who could stand being whipped the most, and the state honored victors with inscribed statues. Apparently, some boys died or came close to dying rather than fail during the ordeal (Plut. *Lyc.* 18.2). Lucian (*Anach.* 38) stresses the violence of the ball, island, and whipping contests, which Sparta staged as paramilitary exhibitions of their young men’s teamwork, toughness, and courage.

Spartan males were taught proper athletic fitness, martial virtues, and a desire for a “good death” within a culture of honor and shame. Cowards were ostracized and ridiculed: they were not admitted to share a tent or to wrestle with another Spartan, they were excluded from ball games and had only the humblest roles in choral dancing, they and their sisters could not marry anyone, and they had to endure other forms of public humiliation (Xen. *Lac.* 9.1–6). Cowardice thus excluded one from the normal family life and leisure pursuits (games, dances) of properly courageous Spartans.

As well as physical training, hunting played an important role in Spartan male society and education, as it did in Athens and Macedon (David 1993; Barringer 2002, 12–14). Hunting supplied meat for the men’s messes, and related rituals included sacrifices and even combats between boars. The night before the fight on the island (Paus. 3.14.9–10), the teams sacrificed puppies to Enyalios and arranged fights between hand-reared boars; the team whose boar won usually won the combat the next day. Apparently, only those Spartans who had just hunted could participate in the banquet at the festival of Artemis (Lib. *Or.* 200.23). While hunting was not an athletic contest, hunting

talents and success represented physical excellence and a noble lifestyle. Hunting also emphasized individual initiative and resourcefulness beyond the collective mentality of barracks, mess, and phalanx.

Female physical education

Sparta also institutionalized a system of physical education for girls that combined widespread Greek and distinctively Spartan features. Spartan females ran the family house and property, as in other states, but above all, they were to produce healthy sons for the army. All Greek states ritually prepared girls for marriage from an early age, but Spartan girls married later than usual (perhaps at 18–20). Before girls married, the state trained their bodies with a program including public exercises, parades, choral dances, and initiatory runs, all tied to cults, and all to demonstrate their maturation in preparation for marriage, childbirth, and productive motherhood.⁷ Sparta's system undoubtedly produced the fittest females in Greece.

We should not, however, exaggerate the extent and nature of Spartan female participation in sport.⁸ Christesen (2012a, 219) cautions that "... we have almost nothing in the way of detailed information about how Spartan girls trained for and competed in sports." Gaps and distortions in evidence, representation, and perception concerning Spartan females have created what amounts to a "legend" or "mirage." J. Ducat (2006, 223) remarks that the ancient literary sources on Spartan females come from males and "as soon as the subject of women is raised, fantasy springs up everywhere. The mythology of the Spartan woman is, therefore, particularly rich," with entwined motifs of beauty, liberation, licentiousness, and gynecocracy (female power). Moreover, as Ducat (2006, 223) says, the Spartan female experience "certainly had a history," so we should be cautious about applying the testimony of late sources to early Sparta.

Non-Spartan authors, especially Athenians, found the idea of Spartan female exercise shocking—or enticing.⁹ In the sixth century, Ibykos (frag. 58) claimed Spartan women were "thigh flashers," and c. 425 Euripides' *Andromache* (595–601) says the exercises of Spartan girls—supposedly sharing running tracks and wrestling grounds with males—ensured that they were not chaste.¹⁰ Aristophanes c. 415 makes his Spartan character Lampito (*Lys.* 76–82) assertive and proud of the fitness she has acquired through dancing and training exercises such as the *bibasis* (jumping up and kicking one's buttocks with one's heels, Pollux, 4.120).

Based on rumors rather than eyewitness experience, Athenian artists crafted imaginative representations of Spartan females. Neils (2012) persuasively identifies several images of apparently athletic females (nude, with strigils or small oil flasks, some swimming, driving chariots, or in homoerotic poses) on late sixth- and fifth-century Athenian vases as depictions not of courtesans

(*hetairai*) but of Spartan females. She also interprets some late fifth-century images (by the Aberdeen Painter) usually taken as of Atalanta as depictions of Spartans. Such images of athletic females, on vases used in male social settings (symposia), reflect Athenian male fantasies or imaginative fascination with the beauty, allure, and real or imagined activities of Spartan women.

Like the male *agoge* in Roman Sparta, the female system of physical education probably became more extreme and notorious, perhaps inspiring later imitations or exaggerations. For example, Propertius' claims (3.14.1–10, in the late first-century BCE) that female Spartans practiced throwing the discus, boxing, and *pankration* in the nude among male athletes cannot be taken seriously. Later still, in the early third-century CE, Athenaeus (366e) suggests that Spartan practices led to nude coed wrestling among male and female youths on Chios. Apparently, Spartan female sport, and prurient interest in it, grew over time.

As with Spartan male sport, our best source is the *Spartan Constitution* by Xenophon, a fourth-century Athenian exile and author who knew Sparta well and praised Sparta's education of males and females as superior to that of Athens and other states. Citing Spartan female practices as an example of Spartan exceptionalism, Xenophon (*Lac.* 1.4, Miller 2012, no. 152) says Lycurgus felt it was the freeborn women's function to bear children, so he ordered that "the female should do no less bodybuilding than the male," and he established "contests (*agones*) for the women in footraces and in strength (*ischus*, probably wrestling matches) just like those for the men" so that both parents would be strong and produce better children. Expanding on Xenophon, Plutarch's late first-century CE assertion (*Lyc.* 14.2, *Mor.* 227d) that Lycurgus introduced female discus and javelin events (in addition to footraces and wrestling) at best refers to a later expansion of female sport.¹¹

Some bronze statuettes produced in or around Sparta apparently depict runners (and probably some dancers) in short chitons (tunics) (see [Figure 11.1](#)), sometimes lifting their hems (see Scanlon 2002, 127–37).¹² Other more numerous Spartan statuettes of girls (mostly handles for mirrors or libation-saucers), some topless and some nude, or wearing triangular briefs suitable for vigorous exercises, have been found, but they may simply be women's mementos of maturation rituals (especially choral dances)—luxury goods for personal use in Sparta.¹³ Some figurines have strigils, and Spartan males perhaps won strigils as prizes, but the rewards for athletic females probably were male approval and marriage.

Scholars debate whether—or when—Spartan females exercised fully in the nude. Plutarch (*Lyc.* 14.2–4, Miller 2012, no. 153) says that, like the boys, girls were to "parade in the nude and to dance and sing at certain religious festivals in the presence of the young men as spectators" He adds that the kings, elders, and all the citizens were present at "the spectacle" of the maidens' performances and that the girls' nudity was not shameful but rather

it encouraged them to be modest and fit. The words Plutarch uses (*gymnai*, *gymnosis*), however, could mean naked or lightly clothed.

Plato (*Resp.* 5.452–7) recommends nude exercise for the female Guardians in his ideal state, but the passage shows that the idea of nude female sport was seen as ridiculous outside of Sparta. Adapting Spartan ideas for another ideal state (*Leg.* 833c and d), Plato later recommended nude running contests for virgins, but said that girls over 13 should be decently dressed.

While dancing and playing sports, Spartan girls seem to have worn a short tunic that left their arms and much of their legs bare. Since explicit references to Spartan females exercising in the nude come from later, less reliable sources (e.g., Prop. 3.14.1–4; Ov. *Her.* 16.149–52), it is best to agree with Ducat (2006, 235–7) and Christesen (2012a, 207–8) that Spartan girls probably were only nude in certain religious contexts, notably while performing in festivals and processions (Plut. *Lyc.* 14.4).

The nude processions of virgins, like their choral dances, were public, ritualized spectacles witnessed by citizen audiences who felt a sense of involvement, comfort, and pride in the performances.

Spartan females also were exceptional in engaging in equestrian activities. Some apparently drove two-horse chariots in the Hyakinthia festival (Ath. 139–40). Pomeroy (2002, 19–21) makes a strong case for Spartan female equestrianism (riding horses and driving horse carts), both in knowledge and practice (see later on Kyniska).

Moderns might prefer to see Spartan female physical education as enlightened or liberating, but external and later sources exaggerated the athleticism and independence of Spartan girls. Christesen (2012a, 212–14, 246–7) sees some degree of empowerment for the girls, but he feels that regular exercises and competition were part of the Spartan process of social conditioning: female sport and dancing supported social order and patriarchal norms calling for “... females to be compliant, beautiful objects of male desire” (197, 214). As T. Scanlon (2002, 121–38) concludes, Sparta’s goals in physically educating girls were erotic, eugenic, initiatory, and prenuptial. Their training and nude parades before young men were to promote breeding and fitness to assist healthy childbirth (Xen. *Lac.* 1.4; Plut. *Lyc.* 15.1).¹⁴ Like the citizen boys, girls underwent physical education to be better able to contribute to the good of the state: girl power for manpower. Moreover, in Sparta, as throughout Greece, a girl’s “sporting life” ended with marriage.

Spartan Athletics

S. Hodkinson (1999) and P. Christesen (2012a) dispel long-standing misconceptions about Sparta’s athletic history. While the heroic individualism of athletic competition seems antithetical to the Spartan mentality of

teamwork and corporate military excellence, Sparta encouraged resourcefulness and competitiveness in individual soldiers. Possibly a Spartan, the late-seventh-century poet Tyrtaios is often considered a critic of athletics, but he (frag. 12.1–2, 10–4; West, *Iambi et Elegi*, 2:157) merely espoused hoplite military excellence above athletic skills for its crucial value to the state, without excluding acceptance of athletic games (Hodkinson 1999, 149). Sparta was not opposed to athletic competition within or beyond Sparta,¹⁵ for individualized agonistic initiative and display, within limits, strengthened Sparta's reputation for physical prowess and courage.

Local dedications of figurines, athletic equipment (e.g., jumping weights), and stelae show that Spartans competed among themselves in typical Greek athletic contests inside Sparta and commemorated their wins. A street in the Spartan agora was called the *Dromos* (racecourse), and Pausanias (3.14.6–7) reports seeing youths practicing running on a racecourse called the *Dromos* by the Eurotas. Dedications suggest that the Karneia festival, perhaps established c. 676–673, included musical, equestrian, and gymnastic events: the pentathlon and the three Olympic footraces (*stadion*, *diaulos*, and *dolichos*), as well as footraces of greater length: the *makros dromos* and the *pente dolichos* (Kennell 1995, 65–7; Miller 2004, 146–7). A fourth-century marble stele from the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia celebrating the victory of Arexippos has five grooves for iron sickles won in the contest of boys (*paidikos agon*). Several athletic dedications also were found in the sanctuaries of Athena Chalkioikos on the Spartan Acropolis and of Apollo at Amyklai. Like other Classical Greeks, Spartan athletes increased the size and expense of their dedications, as well as placing more emphasis on the individual athlete himself. The Spartan state also publicly recognized athletic success; official lists of victors were displayed from at least the fifth century on (Hodkinson 1999, 152–7).

Spartans and Olympia

However unreliably (see Christesen 2007, 159–60), the Olympic Victor List suggests that Spartans dominated early Olympic competition, with some 32 wins in the seventh century and numerous wins in the *stadion* between 684 and 580. A traditional notion holds that Sparta became so isolationist and obsessed with war, and so brutalized its youth, that Spartan participation and success in athletics at Olympia declined dramatically from c. 550 on, after which Spartans shifted to chariot events. Revising this scenario, Hodkinson argues that Sparta's real athletic decline began in the 580s or 570s, that Sparta had five athletic and five chariot victories between 550 and 450, and that its real equestrian concentration dates to the second half of the fifth and fourth centuries.¹⁶ Curiously, we have no evidence for Spartan competition in other than equestrian events at other Panhellenic sites, and there is a near absence of Spartan boxers or pankratiasts in Olympic victor lists or local dedications. The ancient conjecture (e.g., Plut. *Lyc.* 19.4, *Mor.* 228d) that events involving

gestures of submission were banned for Spartans is probably wrong. Rather, Sparta perhaps discouraged these events because they were thought to lack military value (Hodkinson 1999, 158–60).

Pausanias noted several statues of early Spartan Olympic victors at Olympia and at Sparta, but Sparta put up the statues only long after the victories. By the early fifth century, Sparta was a great land power, but it faced internal problems including ambitious leaders, natural disasters, and revolts. Like other states, it turned to the athletic glories of the past as political tools and talismans. Fifth-century Sparta commissioned a statue, supposedly by Myron (Paus. 6.13.2), of the seventh-century runner Chionis, who won seven Olympic footrace victories over four Olympiads (664–656 BCE; Moretti 1957, no. 42–7), and a stele at home in Sparta listed his wins at Olympia and elsewhere.¹⁷ Pausanias (6.15.8) also notes a statue at Olympia of Eutelidas, Sparta's boys' wrestling and pentathlon victor of 628. Similarly, the Spartan Hipposthenes and his son Hetoimokles, who together accumulated 11 Olympic wins in wrestling from the 630s to the 580s, received later honors. Hetoimokles got a statue at Sparta, but Hipposthenes received a temple, and following an oracle, he was honored like Poseidon at Sparta (Paus. 3.13.9, 3.15.7). With its tie to Poseidon, the cult of Hipposthenes was perhaps a response to the earthquake and helot revolt of 464–460. Sparta was glorifying its past victors as international propaganda, and as elsewhere in Greece, Sparta also heroized dead victors in response to crises at home (Hodkinson 1999, 165–7).

Commemorating victories

Apparently self-glorification for Olympic victory alone was circumspect and prohibited at Sparta. Victory odes apparently were unknown at Sparta, and custom may have held that one could mention a dead man's Olympic victory in an inscription at Sparta only if (and after) mentioning his death in war (Hodkinson 1999, 170–1).¹⁸ No sixth- or fifth-century commemorations of contemporary Spartan Olympic victories survive from sanctuaries at Sparta (although some turn up in the fourth century), which suggests Spartan prohibitions locally. At Olympia, however, private Spartans made modest athletic dedications, and Spartans made prominent equestrian dedications at Olympia in Classical times.¹⁹

Sparta perhaps had a policy of restraint but victors still commemorated local wins at home (Hodkinson 1999, 170–6). For example, the Spartan Damonon made a dedication to Athena Chalkioikos on the Spartan Acropolis just before or after the Peloponnesian War; his stele has a relief of a racing chariot and a long inscription detailing his numerous wins and those of his son Enymakratidas. Damonon won 11 running victories as a youth, and his son won even more, spread over nine festivals in Spartan territory. Damonon and his son also won 47 chariot races and 21 horse races at eight different festivals

throughout Sparta and Messenia (*IG* V.1.213; Hodkinson 2000, 303–7). Damonon bred racehorses and drove his own chariots, but the Peloponnesian War (or Sparta’s problems with Elis) may have kept him and his son from competing abroad. Nevertheless, he proclaimed his local victories prominently within Sparta.

Many states gave their Olympic victors material rewards and civic privileges, but Sparta granted its living Olympic victors no material rewards and only the one privilege of fighting beside the Spartan king in battle (Plut. *Lyc.* 22.4, *Mor.* 639a). Sparta appreciated the honor that victories brought to the state, but Spartan custom demanded that no one receive more honors than the kings. No statues of living victors could honor them more than state leaders, and athletic victors were never supreme commanders in war or sole, primary founders of colonies (Hodkinson 1999, 167–70).²⁰ There was no conflict between victors and the leadership of the state; Sparta had no athletic Kylon or Alcibiades.

Kyniska: Gender, Politics, and Racing Chariots at Olympia

As noted, rich Spartans displayed their wealth by competing in Olympic chariot races, and Sparta’s string of fifth-century chariot wins ended only when Spartans were temporarily banned from Olympia starting in 420. Sparta’s next chariot victory, in 396, became famous because the winner was Kyniska, daughter of King Archidamus. As a woman, she could not attend the Olympics (see [Chapter 11](#)), but she entered a four-horse chariot indirectly and became the first female Olympic victor. She won another Olympic victory in the four-horse chariot race in 392, and two monuments at Olympia celebrated her success (Paus. 5.12.5, 6.1.6). Her victory epigram, known from an inscribed base (*IvO* 160) and from the *Palatine Anthology* (13.16), says, in her voice, that her brothers and fathers were Spartan kings, that she won the chariot race and set up a statue, and that she was the “only woman in all Greece” to win at Olympia.²¹

Little else is known about Kyniska. Having inherited part of Archidamus’ estate in 427, she could have afforded her own chariot team. Ancient sources agree that Spartan females had strong characters and, relative to other Greek women, an unusual amount of independence and wealth.²² A dedication to Helen at Sparta bore Kyniska’s name (*IG* V.1.235), and Pausanias (3.15.1) later saw a hero shrine for her at Sparta.²³

Kyniska’s motives in racing chariots remain uncertain. Xenophon, a friend of Kyniska’s brother, King Agesilaos, wrote that Agesilaos “persuaded” Kyniska to breed horses and that her chariot victory showed that a chariot owner was wealthy but not necessarily a person of virtue (*Ages.* 9.6). Centuries later, echoing Xenophon, Plutarch (*Ages.* 20.1, *Mor.* 212b) says that disapproving

of the Spartans' enthusiasm for horse-racing, Agesilaos used Kyniska to send a message "to the Greeks." Even later, Pausanias (3.8.1) omits Agesilaos and says Kyniska was very eager to win at Olympia and was the first woman to breed horses and win at Olympia. Living in a later world familiar with greater opportunities for female sport (see [Chapter 11](#)) perhaps helped Pausanias assume Kyniska's independent ambitions.

Scholars disagree on this subject. Pomeroy (2002, 19–24) presents Kyniska as "the first female star in Greek athletics," "an expert in equestrian matters" with a "single-minded devotion to racing." Others question the degree of her independence and intentionality, and suggest the possible influence and motives of Agesilaos. Some relate Kyniska's chariot racing to Agesilaos' concerns about Spartan expenditures on racehorses or about political rivals, or his desire for Panhellenic propaganda.²⁴ Perhaps Agesilaos used a female victory to challenge the prestige of male chariot victories (Scanlon 2002, 21–3) or perhaps Kyniska's win just reinforced the inferior status of females.²⁵

Other possible factors were political and emotional (Kyle 2003). Sparta bore animosity to Elis for joining an anti-Spartan alliance in 420 that banned Spartans from Olympia in 420, and for flogging the Spartan Lichas for defying that ban. In 416, Alcibiades of Athens won unprecedented success in Olympic chariot racing via extravagant expenditure (see [Chapter 8](#)), and he boasted of his fame (Thuc. 6.16.1–2). In 415, Alcibiades deserted to Sparta but soon departed, supposedly after impregnating King Agis' wife (Plut. *Alcib.* 23.7–9, *Ages.* 3.1–2). Alcibiades was murdered in 404, perhaps by Spartan orders, but his bragging and his insult to the royal family were remembered. Leading a war against Persia in 396, Agesilaos may have pressured, or simply allowed, his sister to enter a chariot at Olympia. Her intrusion avenged Elis' Olympic ban against Sparta, and her win diminished Alcibiades' glory by showing—to Spartans and other Greeks—that chariot victories were about wealth and not personal excellence.²⁶

Possibly Kyniska was self-motivated and eager for equestrian success, or possibly Agesilaos used her for his own ends, or perhaps their agendas were complementary. Whatever Kyniska's motives, Pausanias (3.8.1) says that other women, especially Spartans, later won Olympic victories, but none became as illustrious for their wins as Kyniska.²⁷ Certainly, Hellenistic royal females followed and even sought to outdo Kyniska's example (see [Chapter 12](#)).

Not So Strange Greeks

Sparta's *agoge* entrenched an ethos of collective and military virtues, encouraging fitness, initiative, and competitiveness, especially along team and initiatory lines, to produce robust citizens. Spartan physical education became distinctive in including females, in its degree of state involvement, in its

institutionalized pederasty, and (perhaps at a later date) in its degree of violence. The system worked, but over time, Sparta's lack of flexibility in war and sport undermined its success. Aristotle (*Pol.* 1338b25–9) suggests that Sparta had been innovative in physical training, but (by the fourth century) other states had become more successful in athletics and war.

In terms of physical education and athletics, early Sparta and Athens were not as different as is usually assumed. Other than Sparta's nude physical training of girls, the contrast is largely a matter of degree. Both states staged civic athletic contests for young males because they valued exercise and public performance in fashioning ideal citizens. Both had obscure local rituals, as well as nudity, pederasty, and homoeroticism. Both had team events, martial dancing, male and female choral dancing, initiation rituals, equestrian enthusiasm by the elite, a *dromos* inside town, and athletic dedications at home and at Olympia. Families in both Athens and Sparta hired tutors (*paidotribai*) to train their sons, but Classical Athens' democratic and imperial developments brought a higher degree of participation and more lavish prizes and celebrations than Sparta offered.

Sparta had restrictive policies on athletes' self-commemoration or privileges, but it was not an anomalous, antiathletic island. Sparta did not eradicate the desire of individuals and families to strive for agonistic glory. It was not so shortsighted as to prohibit athletic competitions at home or competition abroad. Spartan Olympic victories were numerous, and Spartans commemorated their wins, especially with dedicatory inscriptions. Sparta retrospectively established monuments to early Olympic victors as propaganda, especially in times of crisis. Also, socio-economic changes within Sparta allowed rich Spartans to achieve a dramatic string of Olympic chariot victories from 448 to 420. Classical Sparta perhaps lost ground, but it did not quit the international field. As Hodkinson (1999) shows, Sparta shared in the agonistic culture of Archaic and Classical Greece.

Unlike Athens, Sparta's collective ethos and possible restrictions on commemoration were sufficient safeguards against political problems that individual athletic success might seem to invite—at least before the expansion of hippotrophic ambitions among wealthy Spartans. Sparta's worsening relations with Elis in the fifth century, however, led Elis to misuse its control of Olympia, in turn leading Sparta to attack Elis. Military force could humble Elis but not eliminate the memory of Alcibiades' Olympic triumph and his misconduct at Sparta. With Kyniska as a willing or ambitious participant, Agesilaos used his sister's chariot wins to avenge insults and to deride Alcibiades' Olympic success.

As Kennell (2010) shows, Hellenistic Sparta glorified and ritualized its toughness, using contests to invoke a hazy but glorious past. In anecdotes and by brutalizing its system and rituals, Sparta became a caricature of what it had been. Later, both Sparta and Athens were centers for tourism and physical

education—pieces in the polychromatic mosaic of sport under the Roman Empire.

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Notes

- 1 Essential works include Hodkinson (1989, 1999); Kennell (1995); Cartledge (2001, 79–90); Scanlon (2002, 77–83, 121–38); Newby (2005, 150–67); Ducat (2006); Christesen (2010, 2012a, 2014).
- 2 Christesen (2012b, 141–3, 151–3, 164–78, 2014), applies modern theories and sport sociology to Sparta. Emphasizing the importance of choral dancing and group sport, he argues that sport bolstered social order in Sparta, teaching males to be warriors and girls to be beautiful and compliant. Young Spartans, by socialization and coercion, learned to obey without question, but they also learned to manage autonomy (e.g., by resorting to trickery in securing food). Athletics allowed increased autonomy but the interests of the state dominated.
- 3 Ducat (1999, 2006) argues that classical Sparta combined old initiatory traditions with a militarily and politically focused system of state education.
- 4 Pericles' Funeral Oration (Thuc. 2.39.1), contrasting Spartan and Athenian education, claims Spartans from boyhood endure arduous discipline to become courageous, but Athenians live as they please and yet are just as ready to face danger.
- 5 On Spartan ball games, see Kennell (1995, 38–43, 59–63). O'Sullivan

- (2010, 23–8), suggests that the ball game was prestigious and encouraged military virtues.
- 6 Xen. *Lac.* 2.8–9; cf. Pl. *Leg.* 633b and c; Kennell (1995, 71–9, 126–9, 149–61, 2010, 171–2); Ducat (2006, 249–60).
 - 7 See Pomeroy (2002, 12–27); Ducat (2006, 223–4); Christesen (2012a, 204–8).
 - 8 While patterned on the boys’ training, the girls’ system was less rigorous and less all encompassing. Ferrari (2002, 164–6), notes that Spartan girls were not segregated, taken from their homes, or organized in age groups like the boys.
 - 9 See Millender (1999) on the difficulty of understanding Spartan women when most of the evidence comes from Athenian male authors. She also challenges Spartan female empowerment as largely an Athenian characterization in defense of Athenian patriarchal mores.
 - 10 Christesen (2012b, 153) clarifies that references to the sites of male and female activities (males at the *dromos* (track) and females near the Eurotas) indicate that males and females probably did not exercise together. Spartan females competed “against each other,” not against males.
 - 11 Hodkinson (1999, 150–2) accepts female exercises in pre-Hellenistic Sparta but probably only running and wrestling competitions and probably only for unmarried girls. Pausanias (3.13.7) says that “eleven Daughters of Dionysus” (the Dionysiades) ran a race in honor of Dionysos, which Scanlon (2002, 104–5, 133–5, 287–90), sees as an early prenuptial initiatory rite. A second-century CE inscription (*SEG* 11.610) mentions the race in Roman Sparta but with 12 Dionysiades. See Mantas (1995, 134); Cartledge and Spawforth (2002, 205–6); Christesen (2012a, 206).
 - 12 Ducat (2006, 235–6) notes that none of the three sixth-century statuettes usually cited display the split garments mentioned in some sources, a style of costume likely to inspire the references to “thigh-flashers.” On the costume and possible Spartan female runners at Olympia, see Chapter 11.
 - 13 Pomeroy (2002, 164–5). Ducat (2006, 229) sees such statuettes as support for girls’ wrestling. Stewart (1997, 108–18), and Appendix A, disagrees with Scanlon (2002, 127–38) on the bronzes as evidence of footraces.
 - 14 As Ducat explains (2006, 238), Spartan girls did not train to become “accomplished athletes and carry off victories” at the Panhellenic games: “During the classical era, the pursuit of competitive athletics remains a male preserve.”

- 15 Fragments of Athenian Panathenaic amphoras dedicated at the Temple of Athena Chalkioikos suggest that Spartans competed at Athens; Hodkinson (2000, 308).
- 16 Hodkinson (1999, 161–7). His Figure 1, p. 162, compares Archaic and Classical Spartan athletic and equestrian Olympic victories. Similarly, see Crowther (1988).
- 17 Noting that Chionis' victory stele in Sparta was close to the tombs of the Agiad kings (Paus. 3.14.2–3), Christesen (2010) argues that the Agiad royal family inflated Chionis' record and pushed an image of him as founder of a colony to heroize him c. 470, long after his victories, in order to bolster their contemporary political standing in a difficult time.
- 18 We have assumed (from Paus. 3.8.2) that there were no Spartan victory odes; Hodkinson (1999, 171–3); but it is possible that epinician odes were written for Spartan victors.
- 19 For example, the jumping weight of Akmatidas of c. 500 declares his win in the pentathlon "without opposition" (*akoniti*); Moretti (1953, no. 8); (1957, no. 160). Akmatidas' grandson possibly was Anaxandros (Moretti, 1957, no. 327), who won the Olympic chariot race c. 428; Paus. 6.1.7, 6.2.1; *SEG* 11.1215.
- 20 Lakrates, a Spartan Olympic victor who died in King Pausanias' expedition to Athens in 403, was buried with honors, but Xenophon (*Hell.* 2.4.33) names the two polemarchs before he names the athlete.
- 21 Scott (2010, 204) says the Spartans added Kyniska's statue "to their gathering of athletic statues by the temple of Hera," and he adds (n. 110) that the first female victor statue in the sanctuary "would have made a considerable impact."
- 22 Millender (1999); Hodkinson (2000, 99–103); Cartledge (2001, 106–26); Pomeroy (2002, 73–94).
- 23 See Cartledge (1987, 149–50); Hodkinson (2000, 327–8); Scanlon (2002, 23); Pomeroy (2002, 23); Millender (2009, 24–5).
- 24 Millender (2009, 18–26) feels that the sources for Kyniska "... provide no definitive evidence for either her subservience to Agesilaos' agenda or her own aspirations (26)."
- 25 Golden (1998, 133–4, 2008, 10–12); but cf. van Bremen (2007, 370–1).
- 26 Agesilaos attended the Olympics when Kyniska won again in 392 (Xen. *Hell.* 4.1.40, Plut. *Ages.* 13.3), perhaps to reinforce his message about chariot racing, or perhaps to enhance his reputation after recent political

and military setbacks.

- 27 For example, Euryleonis won the two-horse chariot, perhaps in 368, and had a statue at Olympia; Paus. 3.17.6.

Athletes in Greek Society: Heroes, Motives, Access

If you do [want to win at Olympia], you will have to obey instructions, eat according to regulations, ... exercise on a fixed schedule at definite hours you must not drink cold water nor can you have a drink of wine whenever you want. You must hand yourself over to your coach exactly as you would to a doctor. Then in the contest itself you must gouge and be gouged, there will be times when you will sprain a wrist, turn your ankle, swallow mouthfuls of sand, and be flogged. And after all that there are times when you lose.

Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.15.2–5, trans. W.E. Sweet

High-level Greek athletic competition was not harmless, carefree play, good clean fun, or “sport for the sake of sport.” Families and states socialized males to do their duty, to meet expectations. If able, you contributed to war efforts and you sought athletic success. Socrates told Charmides that an athletic person capable of winning crowns and honor for himself and his state would be seen as a weak coward if he declined to compete (Xen. *Mem.* 3.7.1). Most Greeks, especially those of means and status, felt a strong social incentive to compete and win in public. We tend to see Roman spectacles as unsporting and abusive because of the element of compulsion—of forced performance—exacted by status (i.e., slaves had no rights), law, or imperial whim, but we should not confuse modern notions of individual freedom and rights with the strong agonistic expectations inherent in Greek culture. Competition (in war and games) remained the test, and victory the proof, of manly excellence.

Greek athletes carried a heavy burden, a great investment of time, resources, effort, and emotion, into the stadium. They exposed themselves to possible physical injury, and they ran the serious psychological risk of defeat and shame. Even as they competed individually in events, they were not alone. Athletes passionately played out the tension between individual freedom and the duties of family, class, and citizenship. In this, the skill, the time, and the cost—the agony of earning victory as well as of suffering defeat—ancient and modern athletes are similar.

Second places sometimes were noted (Crowther 1992; Matthews 2007), but Greek athletes were obsessed with individual first-place victory. An uncontested victory (*akoniti*) when an athlete faced no challengers was rare, and most victories were hard ones, long sought, and much celebrated (Crowther 2001). Victors publicized their achievements with statues, odes,

and speeches. Such self-glorification was in the tradition of Homeric aristocratic individualism in war and sport, and, within limits, it was not immoral or offensive.

Why did the athletes compete so hard and risk so much to win? Was it for glory or gain or both? What went through their minds? At best, commissioned victory odes, epigrams, and statues tell us how athletes wanted to be regarded. Athletes' motives were complex and multiple, cultural and individual. Some motivations were positive and idealistic, for notions of competitive manliness went back to Homer's heroic and aristocratic ethos. Other motives perhaps were less admirable or more materialistic. The perceived honors and the pursued rewards were both symbolic and material. At their best, ancient athletes showed dedication to their gods, families, and states, performing magnificently while upholding ideals of endurance, humility, and moderation; but even ancient Olympians knew flaws, fouls, and foul-ups. Greek athletes cheated earlier and more often than purists would like. The athletic alchemy of mixing unbridled agonism and public adoration with high ideals of self-restraint and humility produced some base metal as well as much gold.

This chapter investigates the lives, ideals, motives, and social history—the morality, means, and mobility—of athletes in Archaic and Classical Greece. Who were the athletes, and what did victory mean to them, intrinsically and extrinsically? What qualifications, preparations, and resources did one need to become a successful athlete? What was the social status of athletes and did that change over time or after major athletic success?

Athletic Stars and Stories

Like tales about athletes in the “good old days” of any era, ancient sources have preserved stories about famous Greek athletes.¹ Some are known for impressive numbers or sequences of wins, and others for their strength and appetites. With the elemental, life-or-death quality of their contests, several (especially combat) athletes became revered as larger than life.

Rather like the veneration of mythical founders (e.g., Theseus, Pelops), some great athletes were glorified by their states with the status of “hero.” They generally were Olympic victors who endured ordeals or challenges and achieved amazing feats of strength or athletic “records.” After their deaths—even long after—² they might be honored with a cult (a shrine and rites) and hailed not as gods but as superhumans having magical powers.³ People seeking assistance made dedications at their shrines, and some apparently were credited with talismanic powers useful in wars.⁴

Famous athletes attracted laudatory tall tales of wonders and courage, but heroized athletes were not always saintly. They often were punished for committing fouls or acting immorally, and they often brought calamities upon their cities. Some authors could not resist complaining that even these athletes

were gluttons, stronger of body than mind, afflicted with vanity and arrogance, and prone to tragic ends (see [Chapter 8](#)).

Theogenes (or Theagenes) of Thasos, one of the most successful Greek athletes, was heroized for his feats. He won the *pankration* (476) and boxing (480) at Olympia, as well as three wins at Delphi, ten at Isthmia, and nine at Nemea. He is said to have won over 1300 victories in his long and much traveled 22-year career. Stories summarized in Pausanias (6.11.2–9) say that Theogenes was rumored to be the son of a priest of Thasian Herakles, that the god as a phantom impregnated his mother, and that the nine-year-old boy lifted a statue in the marketplace but was forced to put it back.

Athletic ambitions and rivalries between great athletes could lead to misconduct. Wanting to win both the Olympic boxing and *pankration* in 480, Theogenes registered for both events. He first defeated Euthymos of Italian Lokris (the boxing victor in 484, a subject of tales and later heroized himself; see Currie 2002), but he was so worn out that he did not enter the *pankration*. The judges imposed heavy fines on him for entering the boxing just to spite Euthymos (Paus. 6.6.5). Due to Theogenes' vanity, the *pankration* (Paus. 6.11.4) for the first time was won uncontested (*akoniti*), which undoubtedly displeased the judges and the crowd. To his credit, Theogenes paid the fines in 476 and did not enter the boxing, which Euthymos won in 476 and again in 472. After his death, Thasos erected a statue of Theogenes, which became the focus of a hero cult and was said to have healing properties. Supposedly, the statue fell on and killed an enemy of Theogenes for flogging it, and when thrown into the sea, it brought a famine until Thasos restored it.

The Olympic boxer Kleomedes of Astypalaia improperly killed his opponent in 492 and was disqualified and fined by the judges. Apparently driven mad by this, he went home and tore down a schoolhouse, killing 60 schoolboys within. When outraged, local citizens stoned him, he fled to a temple of Athena and hid in a chest. When the locals opened the chest, he had completely disappeared. The Delphic oracle explained that he was no longer mortal and that the Astypalaiaans should sacrifice to him as a new hero (Paus. 6.9.6–8).

The greatest Olympic wrestler, Milo of Kroton, was not heroized, but he attracted stories for his prodigious strength and record of victories.⁵ He had six Olympic wins (boys' wrestling in 536, then five men's wins by 516) among his 31 Panhellenic crown victories over a career of at least 24 years (536–512 BCE), as summarized in Pausanias (6.14.5–8) and cited in numerous sources. The Babe Ruth of his era, Milo reputedly ate 40 pounds of meat and bread at one sitting, washing it down with eight quarts of wine. He is said to have carried, killed, and then consumed a four-year-old bull. Supposedly, he could burst a cord tied about his forehead merely by the strength of his veins when he held his breath, and he could stand on a greased discus and not be moved. It was said that he could hold a pomegranate in his

fist and not bruise it even as others tried to pry it from his hand; only his girlfriend could remove it (Ael. *VH* 2.24). At the age of *c.* 40, Milo tried for his sixth men's Olympic win, but his younger opponent, Timasitheos, also of Kroton, wore him out by refusing to lock up. After Milo lost, Timasitheos and the crowd still carried the great Milo about the stadium.

When nearby Sybaris attacked Kroton, Milo appeared with a crown on his head and a lion skin over shoulders, carrying a club like Herakles. Rallying Kroton's forces, he drove off the Sybarites. Another tale makes Milo a disciple of Pythagoras and has him save a symposium of Pythagoreans by holding up a collapsing roof and allowing people to escape. Yet Milo died ingloriously. Seeing a tree in the woods with wedges inserted in it to split the trunk, he tried to complete the job with his bare hands. Pulling on the sides of the trunk, he caused the wedges to drop, his hands were caught, and beasts killed him during the night.

The athletic dynasty of the Diagorids of Rhodes included six Olympic victors over three generations, all with statues at Olympia (Paus. 6.7.1–7). Supposedly immense and *c.* seven feet tall, Diagoras won the Olympic boxing in 464 as well as four wins at Isthmia, two at Nemea and Delphi, and several more in Rhodes and at Pellene, Athens, and other places. The family was of the oligarchic nobility of Rhodes, and stories circulated that Diagoras' mother had slept with Hermes. Diagoras was admired for his direct honest style and his obedience to rules. Pindar (*Ol.* 7.87–93, Miller 2012, no. 249) applauds his ethics and integrity:

O father Zeus, give honor to this hymn for a victor at Olympia,
and to his now famous *arete* in boxing.

Grant him grace and reverence among his townsfolk and among foreigners.
He travels the straight path which despises *hubris*,
and he has learned well the righteous precepts of good forefathers.

Diagoras' sons both won at Olympia in 448: Damagetos in the *pankration* (he also won in 452) and Akousilaos in boxing. According to a popular story (e.g., Paus. 6.7.2–3; Cic. *Tusc.* 1.46.11; Plut. *Pelop.* 34.4), Diagoras was present and his victorious sons lifted him up and carried him about to the applause of the crowd. A Spartan supposedly told him to “Die now” because he could achieve no greater glory as a mortal, and in some accounts he died. A third son, Doreius won the *pankration* three times (432, 428, 424) at Olympia, eight times at Isthmia, seven times at Nemea, and once at the Pythia. Two of Diagoras' grandsons also won Olympic combat sports, but there is some uncertainty about their names and dates, and about the possible role of Diagoras' daughter, the mother of one of the victors (see [Chapter 11](#)).

Yet another combat athlete, Poulydamas of Skotussa in Thessaly, a noted

pankratiast (Pl. *Resp.* 1.338c) and Olympic victor in 408, inspired tales in Pausanias (6.5.1–9) and other sources. A very tall man, Poulydamas allegedly killed a huge lion on Mount Olympus with his bare hands to rival the feats of Herakles. Supposedly, he also grabbed a large bull by one hoof and would not let go, forcing the bull to pull his own hoof off. Poulydamas also supposedly stopped a chariot driven toward him at great speed. Hearing of his feats, King Darius II invited Poulydamas to his court at Susa, promising him gifts (Paus. 6.5.7; cf. Philostr. *Gym.* 22). Poulydamas challenged three Persian Immortals (elite Persians, bodyguards of the king) to combat and killed all three at once. Like Milo, Poulydamas met a sad end. Sometime after he lost at Olympia in 404, he and some friends entered a cave; when the roof began collapsing, the friends rushed out, but the vain athlete thought he could hold up the roof. He failed and perished.

The stories of Poulydamas sound suspicious, but Pausanias (6.5.7) mentions a statue at Olympia with depictions of the exploits on its base. A statue base in the Museum at Olympia (inv. no. A 45) bears scenes of the Persian king watching Poulydamas wrestle with an opponent (on the front); on the left side, he wrestles with a lion, and on the right side, he is seated on the lion's skin (Taeuber 1997). As with Theogenes, the Greeks heroized Poulydamas after his death and attributed healing powers to his statue (Lucian *Dial. D.* 12).

Tall tales about great athletes grew even taller over time. Philostratos (*Gym.* 43) uncritically reports that early athletes (e.g., Polymester, Glaukos) trained by carrying heavy weights, chasing rabbits or horses, bending thick iron rods, pulling wagons, or wrestling bulls and lions, and that some competed in eight or nine Olympics. In a largely oral culture, such stories incorporated motifs from heroes of myth. Herakles, a hero-god of athletics, aggression, and all forms of physicality, was a ready source for strongman motifs (e.g., challenges, feats of strength, character flaws, and tragic overconfidence in physical powers). Oral folklore, inspired in part by epigrams and images from sculpture, turned historical athletes into superhuman folk heroes, resulting in the fulsome accounts in later authors such as Pausanias, Aelian, and Philostratos. Pausanias tells the stories of victors while noting their statues at Olympia, the very statues that ensured their fame and perhaps prompted elements of the tales.

Pindar on Victory and Glory

The greatest writer of victory odes (*epinikia*) was Pindar of Thebes (518–c. 438), from whom 45 poems for victors from 16 states are extant. That genre of poetry goes back to the epigrams of Simonides (sixth/fifth century) and possibly has roots with Ibykos in the mid-sixth century. Along with his contemporary Bacchylides, Pindar, with his intricate, compressed, allusive style, and his imagery and mythical references, brought the genre to its height

in the fifth century.

Pindar's odes articulate an aristocratic ideology of athletic preparation, effort, competition, and victory.⁶ He wrote that athletes needed exceptional natural talent, the god-given potential found in a noble family. Victorious forebears and illustrious family traditions were auspicious omens, but victory still demanded effort and toil (*ponos*). Athletic success required the expenditure of energy and resources; you have to pay the price for the prize. Guidance from an experienced trainer could hone your skills and help you reach your potential. Pindar (*Ol.* 8.54–60, 66) notes that the trainer Melesias of Athens was a former victor himself and that 30 victories were won under his instruction, and Pindar calls the trainer Menander of Athens (*Nem.* 5.48–9) a “fashioner of athletes.” Piety also was important, for you needed divine favor (*charis*) to win. You prayed and made vows before competing, and you gave votives or tithes after winning. You sought a god's protection lest there be curses against you, and you hoped for divine help with the lots that assigned lanes, opponents, and byes.

Victory at the great games brought glory and honor surpassed only by military virtue and success. A far cry from modern victory celebrations, Pindar's ideal victor, in the moment of victory and while being crowned, was to show composure and humility (*aidos*). He was to be the picture of *kalokagathia* (a combination of physical beauty and moral goodness), so artistic scenes of wreathed athletic victors usually depict them with downcast eyes and a modest posture (see [Figure 10.1](#)). Even great victors were to appreciate their good fortune and their limits. To be overly proud, to aspire to immortality (*Isth.* 5.14; *Nem.* 7.11–16), was to invite divine envy and disfavor (*phthonos*). Pindar (*Pyth.* 10.22–9, Loeb, trans. J.E. Sandys) says that poets celebrate the talented man who wins great athletic prizes and whose son is also a victor: “The brazen heaven he cannot climb; but, as for all the bright achievements which we mortals attain, he reacheth the utmost limit of that voyage.” A well-earned athletic victory, or watching your son triumph, was all a mortal could hope for (Young 1993, 2004, 67–79), but it could bring the immortality of enduring fame (*kleos*).

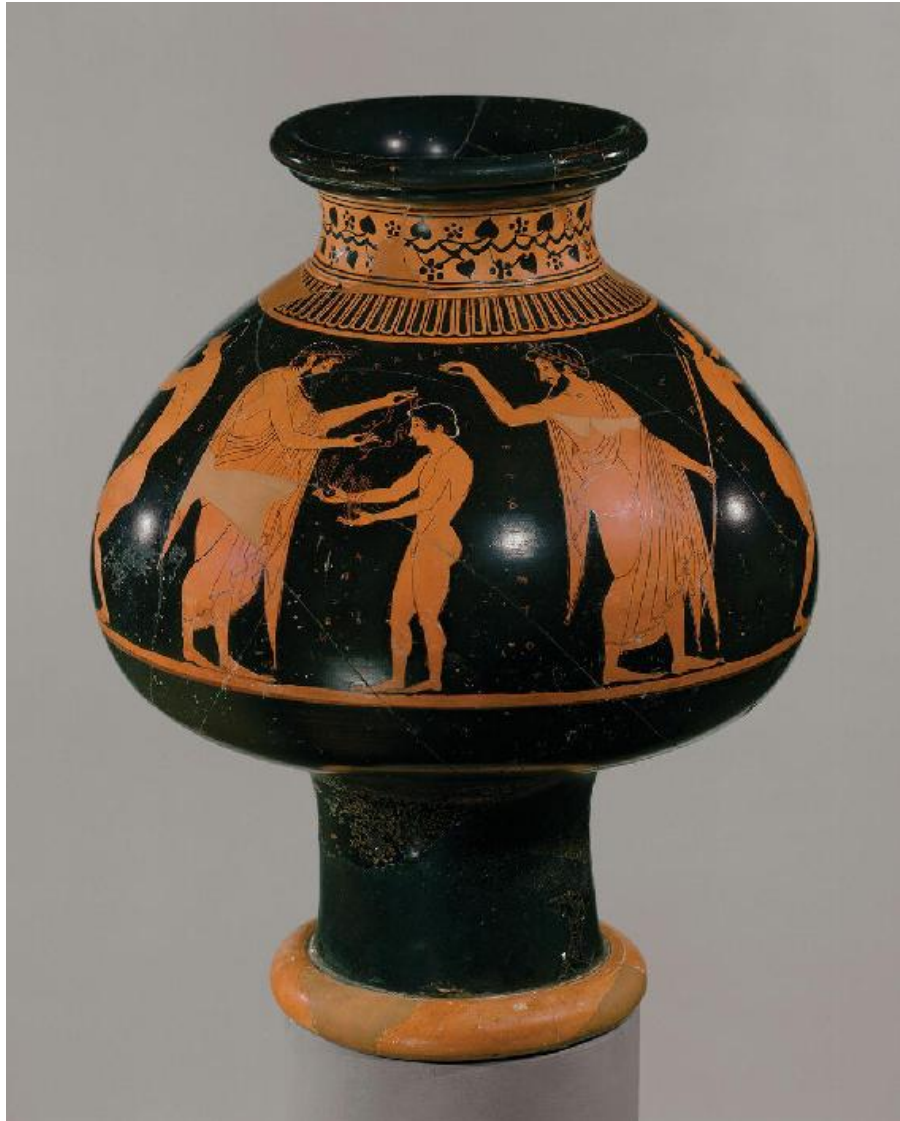


Figure 10.1 Victory scene: athlete receives prize; on psykter attributed to Oltos. c. 520–510 BCE. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1910. Inv.10.210.18.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence.

For the few victors, there were many more losers, and Pindar upholds the Homeric shame culture. As Hector told Andromache, public defeat and embarrassment were worse than injury or even death. The will to win was reinforced by the fear of failure. Pindar writes of the dreary journeys home of embarrassed losers, slinking by back streets and being taunted (*Ol.* 8.68–9, *Pyth.* 8.83–7). Although the idea of facing death in a staged combat is usually associated with Roman gladiatorial combats, Greek athletes faced symbolic

and sometimes actual death in competition. Pindar's ideology of victory and defeat helps explain why athletics had an ethos of "all or nothing," or "death before dishonor."⁷

Pindar wrote his odes to be sung to an audience, but the performance context is uncertain (see Carey 2007). Probably a chorus and not a solo singer performed them in a public celebration at the site of the victory or as part of the victor's honors at his homecoming (Pind. *Nem.* 2.25, 4.78–9, *Ol.* 11.15, *Pyth.* 8.85–7). Later single singers might perform them at private symposia. The public context presented some interesting social dynamics between the victor and other elements in his city. As old bastions of aristocratic power and status were being undermined, aristocrats treasured athletics even more as a forum for self-presentation and differentiation. Status display, however, required more tact in an age of social mobility and broadening constitutional bases.

Pindar saw himself as an intermediary and conciliator speaking to both victor and audience. L. Kurke (1991) suggests that the social function of Pindar's "sociological poetics" was to mediate tensions and to help reintegrate the athletic victor, isolated by his achievement and risking envy, into the heterogeneous communities of his family, his aristocratic community, and his civic or political community. Pindar wisely advised the victor to remember his place in the family, class, state, and cosmos. To counter the tension between aristocratic competitiveness and the state ideology of citizenship and cooperation, Pindar adapted the concept of *megaloprepeia* or competitive, lavish expenditure by the wealthy on public adornments for the city. In Pindaric terms, the athlete's victory, itself a gift from the gods, was a gift shared by his family, the aristocracy, and the city, and he therefore deserved the return gift of praise and honor—and not envy.⁸

No anonymous or humble poet, Pindar was proud of his skills. At times, he compares his talents and tactics to those of craftsmen and athletes. Arguing that his art best ensured the broad and immortal fame of victors, he claims that his poems were more influential than the sculptor's victory statues: his poems took ship and traveled while the statues stood still (*Nem.* 5.1–5). A victor perhaps chose to commission a statue or an ode, or neither or both, depending on the aspirations and resources of his family and homeland, but Pindar was not above self-advertisement.⁹

Reflecting Homer's aristocratic, anti-banausic (anti-manual or working-class labor) values, Pindar's victors were supposed to be moved by glory and not greed, but they profited materially from many of their victories, and Pindar profited from declaring them to be above such things. Pindar was admired and handsomely rewarded for his skills, leaving himself open to ancient criticisms and modern debate about his sincerity. Admittedly, once commissioned, Pindar and Simonides did their best to applaud the victor's family and state. Aristotle (*Rh.* 3.2.14 (1405b)) makes fun of Simonides for first refusing a

commission to write an ode for a mule-cart victory and then, when the fee was raised, praising mules as “daughters of storm-footed horses.” Pindar himself wrote two Olympic odes for Sicilian mule-cart victors. Aristophanes offers a biting portrait (Av. 905–57) of a disreputable poet who constantly sings in the manner of Pindar and must be bribed to go away. Yes, Pindar, like Homer, was paid to praise, but both were inspired poets whose voices speak across the ages.

Athletes, Social History, and Democratization

Modern interest in social history inclines us to investigate the social backgrounds and possible social mobility of Greek athletes,¹⁰ but the limitations of our evidence hinder us. Perhaps 200–250 athletes competed at each Olympiad (Crowther 1993, 49), but we know the names of perhaps less than 3 percent of ancient Olympic competitors (Miller 2004, 160–1) and only about a quarter of ancient Olympic victors (Farrington 1997, 24). Many are known only by name, city, and event. We cannot even agree about the careers of some of the most famous and well-attested stars, and, of course, aristocrats and the wealthy, with resources for self-commemoration, are disproportionately represented in ancient sources.

Debate about the sociology, the social origins and status, of Greek (non-hippic) athletes has gone on for a long time, and will likely continue. Modern notions of amateurism, democracy, and self-made athletes may influence interpretations. People may tend to see what they want to see, or what they have seen—poor but pure Greeks pre-validating the modern Olympic creed or free agent stars coldly calculating their market value. The world of the Greek athlete was not static or monolithic, and socio-economic changes expanded participation, but the practicalities, expense, and odds of success in top-level athletic competition favored those with family resources.

Some clarification of terms is necessary, as scholars have asserted increasing “democratization” or persistent “elitism” in Greek sport and society. Elite (aristocratic or upper-class) status is usually acquired by birth and/or by conspicuous wealth. The “democratization” of sport has been discussed in two potentially reciprocal or related senses: generally, to assert the widening of access and participation beyond a minority of aristocrats,¹¹ and also to suggest a relationship between athletics and politics whereby gymnastic athletics fostered democratic ideology and broader political participation.¹² A better term for the social rather than the political sense of democratization may be the “meritocratization” of athletics, meaning that those of adequate natural talent (and at least moderate economic resources) largely had equal opportunity to become athletes. This discussion concentrates on a long-standing and lively debate about meritocratic athletic access to competitive athletic participation in Archaic and Classical Greek society. Less attention is

paid to the possible relationship of athletics to democratic or other political developments.¹³

First, we should be aware of different approaches. Scholars still disagree about the definition/criteria of “athletics” or “sport,” whether hippic competition is “sporting” and whether forms of competitive group dancing should be included. Studies may focus on athletics at Olympia and the “crown” games or on civic athletics in particular states, notably Athens and Sparta. With the growth of modern sport sociology, scholars have shifted their emphasis from historical individuals to groups and social classes to offer generalizations assisted by modern theories or models. However, Greek athletics overall retained a significant hierarchy of competition ranging from local occasional participation in tribal or team events in civic contests to the highly specialized and protracted competition and careers of “stars” of the international athletic circuit. “Sport for all” would have baffled an ancient Greek.

The historiography of Greek athletes

The influential works of E.N. Gardiner (1864–1930) present the social history of Greek athletes as a simple, sad story: an early age of idealistic, noble, amateur, sporting “gentlemen” declined, by excess popularity and money prizes, into decadent, lower-class professionalism, “shamateurs,” and “pothunters” (1910, 1930). For Gardiner, the essence of the Greek athletic ideal was already present in Homer: sport was the natural expression of a martial spirit and the love of competition, aristocratic and spontaneous, free of intense training and specialization. After Homer, athletic festivals emerged, and Olympia became a force for Hellenic unity, but potential problems appeared in the sixth century. Paradoxically, even before Greek sport reached the “age of the athletic ideal,” non-Olympic festivals and honors for victors were expanding dangerously. As the “spirit” weakened, sport strayed from the moderate ideal, and excess and corruption set in during the fifth century. Continued popularity led to excess honors, over-competition, specialization, and technical training—all signs of professionalism and the start of a long and sorrowful decline. As Gardiner wrote (1910, 122, similarly 1930, 103), “The nemesis of excess in athletics is specialization, specialization begets professionalism, and professionalism is the death of all true sport.” Soon, professionals supposedly monopolized and degraded sport socially and morally. Decline was evident by 400 and fully entrenched by 338. Gardiner offered this tragic tale of early athletic glory, decline, and fall as a morality play for modern sport.¹⁴

As an athlete, teacher, and classicist, Gardiner understandably embraced Victorian ideologies of athleticism, amateurism, and Hellenism.¹⁵ H. Lee (2003) shows that Gardiner also was influenced by concepts of immoderation, professionalism, and decline in earlier works (e.g., Mercurialis, Krause),

notions ultimately derived from Galen's ancient writings. Gardiner warned that "professionalism"—with excess popularity, rewards, and specialization—drove noble amateurs from the major games, which came to be monopolized and degraded by lower-class professionals motivated by profit, men who sold their allegiances, cheated, and brutalized athletics by Hellenistic times.

Gardiner's scenario went unchallenged until the 1970s when H.W. Pleket explained that the study of ancient sport has been misled by a "classicist bias" (the tendency to impose "rise-and-fall" patterns) and by the ideologies of amateurism and Olympism. In fact, ancient athletes regularly competed for valuable prizes with no stigma attached, and Olympic victory brought wealth. Athletes saw prizes as gifts (*dora*), not wages (*misthos*), a matter of glory (*kleos*), not profit (*kerdos*). Pleket argues that lower-class professionalism arose only after Pindar, and that from Pindar's until Roman imperial times, the upper classes were not absent from sport, either from the running events or the combat sports. He also suggests that the prevailing ideology of sport came from the value system and mentality of the aristocrats of Archaic Greece, and that even in the postclassical era, athletes, from whatever class, espoused the traditional, aristocratic athletic ethos of glory, piety, courage, toil, and endurance.¹⁶

In the 1980s, D. Young also challenged Gardiner and argued that scholars had misrepresented the Ancient Olympics (see [Chapter 5](#)), and that the Greeks had neither the concept nor a word for "amateur athletics." Young argued that athletes of all classes pursued valuable prizes and rewards eagerly and with impunity, and, against Pleket, that there were significant numbers of lower-class athletes from the beginning (1984, 89–103). He suggests that athletes from families of "moderate origin" could acquire resources and work themselves up to Panhellenic competition, wealth, and status by successfully climbing a ladder of local festivals with valuable prizes.

Certainty eludes us, especially for pre-Classical athletics. As noted (in [Chapter 5](#)), early listings in the ancient Olympic Victor List may not be reliable, and athletes have always attracted tall tales.¹⁷ Recall that the first recorded victor in the sprint race of 776, Koroibos, was a *mageiros*, which generally means cook or butcher but sometimes refers to a priest officiating at sacrifices. If Glaukos (Olympic boxing victor in 520, later governor of Kamarina in Sicily) in fact repaired a ploughshare by pounding it with his fist, was he therefore a humble agrarian or a noble landowner? Was Theogenes of Thasos a wellborn but intensely competitive aristocrat or a self-aggrandizing lower-class upstart? Were Amesinas the cowherd (Olympic wrestling victor in 460) and Polymnestor the goatherd (Olympic boys' sprint victor in 596) humble herdsmen or products of later mythologizing?¹⁸ Was Milo a leader in the war against Sybaris because he was of the upper class or because his athletic success had lifted him above his lower-class origins? Since states rewarded Olympic victors handsomely, it is often impossible to tell if an

athlete had wealth and status before—or because of—his victory.

Following Pleket and focusing not on isolated cases of Panhellenic or semilegendary athletes but on athletes from Athens, the best-documented Greek state, I have argued that athletics in Archaic and Classical Athens remained elitist rather than egalitarian in practice as privileged social groups dominated but perhaps did not fully monopolize high-level competition (Kyle 1987, 102–23, see [Chapter 8](#)). Broader social, economic, and military changes at Athens, however, brought a shift from an elitism of birth (the dominance of the *aristoi*) to an elitism of wealth (with the increase of the middle class (*mesoi*) and *nouveaux riches*) in athletics. Early aristocratic predominance in Classical Athens gave way as athletes from new families and groups appeared, especially in gymnastic events. These new athletes were of respectable birth, but their families seem to have acquired the wealth and leisure for athletic competition from commerce and sources other than ancestral estates. Meritocratic factors (e.g., public facilities, valuable and multiple prizes, team events) apparently led to even broader participation, but well-off families simply had more resources for serious competition. Socio-economic mobility probably influenced sport more than sport influenced social change.

Since the 1990s, different scholars have supported two opposing positions: one side asserting meritocratic access, state support, and widespread participation by at least the moderately well-off, and the other asserting very limited access and rejecting participation by nonaristocrats. Both sides focus primarily on Athens rather than Greece overall, and on classes or groups rather than individual athletes.

Expanding on Young's notions of access and state support, N. Fisher (1998) argues that Athenian tribal team events (e.g., torch racing, choral dancing) and expanded prize offerings at Athens allowed thousands of nonelite participants to receive some training (subsidized by liturgical gymnasiarchs) and to compete and profit.¹⁹ He suggests a significant increase in participation by nonwealthy youths in Classical Athens, but he admits that lowly commoners (*thetes*) lacked such means of social mobility. Fisher also suggests that young athletes of limited means were individually patronized and supported financially by wealthy Athenians with pederastic motivations. Handsome young athletes attracted mature men of means (e.g., Autolykos, see [Chapter 8](#)), and gifts and hospitality were extended, but Fisher does not push this as a major avenue of social change.

Fisher (2011) expands his argument about the impact of intertribal competitions with calculations and tables of numbers of participants. For example, his Table 1 suggests hundreds of torch racers, and 1700–2000 rowers in the Panathenaic boat race (first attested only c. 380 BCE), but accepting all his numbers (including all tribal members involved in *hestiasis* or feasting in Table 2) raises questions about what constitutes intensive

athletic participation.

Supporting Fisher's case for broad access, P. Christesen (2012, 135–63, 2014a) argues that socio-political changes encouraged “mass sport” (increasingly broad participation and spectatorship) in sixth- and fifth-century Greece. Like Fisher, he suggests a connection between Athens' tribal organization and increased popular political participation in Kleisthenes' constitution (termed *isonomia*) and increased meritocratic athletic access and participation in the Panathenaic tribal team events, especially choral and pyrrhic dancing. He proposes that, in addition to the rich (4–5 percent of the citizens), a full education (including basic athletic training by an athletic tutor for a boy of 7–15 years) was affordable for 40–50 percent of Athenian families of middling or modest wealth (the *mesoi* or *penetes*) if not the poor (*ptochoi*) (2012, 143–51, 164–78, 2007, 63 and n. 24).

Like Miller (see [Chapter 5](#)), Christesen (2012) suggests a connection between meritocratic sport and political democratization in Archaic and Classical Greece. He argues that sport promoted a sense of egalitarianism and unity among newly empowered members of Greek communities that experienced significant periods of democratization and thus played an important role in consolidating and extending democratization in the Greek world. Christesen notes that there was wide support for athletic competitions across all levels of society, and he feels that sports—the concern for equality or fairness in competition, the nudity, state expenditures, and tribal and team events—helped break down barriers and broaden political access and participation.²⁰

The give-and-take on athletic “democratization” continues. In his works on democracy, war, and sport in Athens, D. Pritchard (2003, [2009] 2010, 2013) argues that athletics was fundamentally elitist and “remained an exclusive pursuit of the wealthy” (2003, 332), and that the privately financed instruction (by *paidotribai*), training, and resources needed for athletic participation were unavailable to the poor. He contends that only the rich (i.e., the liturgical class, which he estimates as slightly less than 5 percent of the citizens (2013: 34–83, esp. 46–53) could afford education in all of the three basic areas (letters, music, athletics). Gymnastic instruction for athletic contests was only available in classes of the *paidotribai*, so the poor at most attended large, less expensive classes in letters. As Plato remarked (*Prt.* 313a, 326b and c), selecting a paidotribe was an important matter, and those most able to secure and continue physical training and education were the wealthiest (*plousiotatoi*). Pritchard argues that, before the ephebic reforms of 335 BCE, nonelite youths could not participate in tribal events such as torch races in significant numbers (i.e., the racers were elite local youths from each tribe).²¹ He estimates that, even with state support for ephebes from 335 on, only about one half of the 18-year-old Athenians joined the reformed cadetship (and ran in the torch races), and that ephebes were too old to gain enough ability from training for the torch race to make them serious competitors in

major games.

Scholars, then, disagree about terms (sport, athletics, elite); factors (nudity, pederasty); costs (of private preparation and travel); likelihood of profitable careers; and numbers, duration, and intensity of participation in team events and dancing versus individual Olympic-style gymnastic contests. Debate will continue, and consensus seems unlikely.²²

The Lower Half of Society: Not Excluded But Not Competing?

I agree that meritocratic factors made sport more accessible at Athens—especially if one includes team dancing—but I still suggest an “elitism of wealth” (of family financial resources) in athletic participation, especially concerning non-team individual competition. Both scholarly positions agree that the poor, the majority or near majority of Athenians, had little or no sustained competitive experience. Youths of the upper and middle (or hoplite) class were more likely than poor Athenians to participate in individual and tribal team events, and even more likely to pursue athletic careers. Educational training and participation in sport and dancing were socially desirable for status display, but they were not mandatory (or affordable) for all Athenian citizens. Roughly half the Athenian citizen male population belonged to a “working class” without adequate leisure time for athletic education, let alone serious athletic competition.

Basic athletic training under instruction was a necessary but insufficient precondition for competitive participation in the Panathenaic “open” individual gymnastic events, events that awarded valuable oil prizes. Prizes for distinctively Athenian “closed” team events were oxen for celebratory feasts—hardly adequate for launching individual athletic careers. Athletes went “on the road” individually, not in teams, and international competition in individual gymnastic events required far more resources, training, and leisure time.

Greek gymnasia were free and open to citizens, and socio-economic changes allowed more Greeks to join the “country club,” but athletics and training did not quickly or fully become egalitarian.²³ There were still many commoners (e.g., citizen *poneroi*, rural farmers) whose resources and lifestyle normally precluded them from athletic participation. Most city-states were small, and agricultural work was highly seasonal, but it is hard to imagine rural peasants regularly walking to town to strip at a gymnasium, exercise, and pursue a decent chance of major athletic victories. Proximity and resources gave prosperous urban citizens an advantage. Even those who used the gymnasia did not necessarily become top athletes, for nude exercise did not always mean athletic devotion and success. Panhellenic competition was far more intense and expensive.

Successfully claiming a higher status was not just a matter of being physically fit and stripping in a gymnasium. As discussed earlier (in [Chapter 4](#); also see Christesen 2012, 172–8), those with the leisure to train daily achieved a total body tan, but any working class person who disrobed, baring his telltale “farmer” tan lines and his pale bottom, became shamefully naked instead of admirably nude.²⁴

Yes, gymnastic athletes competed without clothes or shoes, and they required little equipment. A boxer needed boxing thongs, and pentathletes needed jumping weights, a discus, and a javelin, but the basic equipment for most athletes consisted only of a small jar of oil and a scraping instrument (a strigil) for cleaning oneself. Yet, for display and comfort, one might arrive in fine clothes, use special expensive oil, and have one’s own slave attendant, masseur, and expensive personal trainer. Gymnastic nudity suggested status, but it was a badge of citizenship of means.

Indicting Athenian democracy in the second half of the fifth century, the Old Oligarch (Ps.-Xen. *Ath. Pol.* 1.13) complains that the masses support festival and liturgical programs (state imposed financial support by rich citizens) because the rich pay while the poor get paid for their popular but financially less demanding participation in singing, running, dancing, and sailing in the navy. These comments suggest nonaristocratic participation in tribal events (not elite athletics), but the Old Oligarch also claims that gymnastics and music are beyond the abilities of the masses: commoners (the *demos*) have ruined physical education and culture at Athens (1.13). Even in the tribal events, urban middle-class youths probably dominated. The proliferation of games and prizes brought more opportunity for participation, but even an expanded social elite is still an elite.

Meritocratic Athletics in Practice

Panhellenic athletic competition was meritocratic—fully so in theory, and arguably so in practice, at least to a significant degree and especially by late Classical times. Officially, crown competitions and spectatorship were open to all free (male) Greeks. The expansion of the Panhellenic programs of events created room for more competitors, and the proliferation of local athletic festivals, prizes, and rewards increased the opportunities for competition and profits. International competition nevertheless retained aspects of privilege and elitism. Aspiring Panhellenic athletes faced problems of distance of travel, time, training, and expense.²⁵ Archaic and Classical competitors went to the great games on their own initiative and at their own expense; they were not screened at home by athletic trials or officially supported by local committees.²⁶

Serious athletes regularly traveled about pursuing victories and prizes, especially if that was how they funded their athletic careers. Plato (*Leg.*

7.807c) says that anyone who hopes to win at Olympia or Delphi has no spare time at all for other activities. As more intensive training improved the level of competition, athletes soon hired professional trainers to supervise their exercises and diet. The best trainers cost more and probably worked only with the best prospects.

As well as training, diet, lifestyle, and freedom from manual labor, family traditions were a factor. Pindar mentions (*Pyth.* 11.46–8) a victorious runner whose relatives earlier had raced chariots. In other words, equestrian and gymnastic athletics were a tradition—an opportunity and an expectation—in this wealthy family. Wreaths helped you gain wealth, but wealth helped you gain wreaths.

Too much has been made of Isokrates' comments (*Biga* 16.32–4) in 397 about Alcibiades and athletes. Isokrates (16.33) says Alcibiades claimed that, although capable, he turned away from gymnastic competition and pursued hippotrophy because “some” lowborn, ill-educated athletes from lesser states were participating in gymnastic contests.²⁷ Alcibiades does not make this assertion in the debate with Nicias in Thucydides (6.16.1–2), so probably the rhetor, commissioned by Alcibiades' son, attributed the remarks to Alcibiades as a rationalization, an excuse for Alcibiades' opportunistic hippotrophic display. One may recall Plutarch's story (*Alc.* 2.2) about Alcibiades avoiding a fall in a wrestling match by cheating—by biting, as he said, not like a woman but “like a lion.”

Chariot racing was the obvious choice for Alcibiades. Without the arduous, protracted training needed for gymnastic events, he quickly and effortlessly outdid even the lavish successes of Sicilian tyrants in racing chariots at Olympia. Writing for a jury of common Athenians, Isokrates used motifs similar to those Pericles used in his Funeral Oration to flatter the Athenians and to justify the Peloponnesian War: Athens is a grand and cultured state, one that properly controlled lesser states and one that could avoid rigorous training but still defeat Sparta if it so chose. After the Peloponnesian War, Athenians still wanted to bask in past glory, to believe in their superiority. From the perspectives of Athens as a state and Alcibiades as an individual, of course other athletes and states could not be their social or cultural equal.

With intense, specialized competition for first-place-only crown victories, the odds of Panhellenic success were not good. Demosthenes (*Lept.* 20.141) says that there are great rewards for athletes who occupy the very top ranks, but only a few of the many competitors ever reach the top. Quoting an epigram about an Olympic victor who had been a fish-porter in his youth, Aristotle (*Rh.* 1365a, 1367b) comments that the athlete accomplished something “beyond his peers.”

Socially and psychologically, Panhellenic competition was more difficult for the many than for the few. Hierarchical patterns and values persisted in Greek

sport and society. Crowds listening to Pindaric odes were told that victors came from families with status, resources, and traditions of athletic success. Pindar (*Isth.* 1.47–52) wrote that shepherds, ploughmen, fowlers, and fishermen worry about famine, but warriors and athletes seek fame and rewards.

The Panhellenic stadium was a level playing field, but (physically and financially) athletes needed to get to that field and be well prepared (physically and mentally) to win. To a significant degree, both high-level athletics and democracy remained dominated by the privileged minority, but not as extensively as in earlier ages. By the fourth century, it was increasingly *possible* that exceptionally talented lower-class youths might make it to the major leagues of Greece, but it remained *probable* that athletes from families with resources and traditions still predominated.

Conclusion

Questions about participation in athletics remain a matter of debate until institutionalized subsidization and guilds appear in the Hellenistic era. Without reaching a consensus, scholarship nevertheless has become less naive about social and economic issues. Ultimately, the debate hinges on approaches and matters of degree; there were constructive, meritocratic changes in sport and society relative to earlier eras, but the poorer classes (and females) had little or no chance of extensive, prolonged participation or a career in sport. Although hierarchy persisted in society, the games became more popular—in both senses of the word. They were more accessible to many, less dominated by the few, and their significance for Greek culture remained essential.

Ancient Greece was hardly Gardiner's "nation of athletes" (1910, 131, 1930, 42, 53). Even in the sports-obsessed, supposedly health-conscious modern America, most people are overly sedentary, out of shape, and nonathletic. Most people, ancient and modern, disliking physical discomfort and fearing embarrassing failure, are inclined to be spectators who win their athletic victories vicariously (or virtually). Like Rome later, Greece was a land of fans, home to knowledgeable sports enthusiasts who enjoyed watching the spectacular physical performances put on by a minority of skilled, expert stars.

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Notes

- 1 For biographical summaries of famous athletes, see Golden (2004) by name. On Milo and Theogenes, see Young (1984, 95–8, 153–4).
- 2 Young (2004, 107–9) feels that athletes were not heroized for at least a century or two after their deaths. Christesen (2010) suggests that Chionis of Sparta was heroized long after death to serve a political agenda.
- 3 Fontenrose (1968); Poliakoff (1987, 117–29); and Lunt (2009) offer good overviews. Currie (2005) suggests that some victors actively sought or anticipated heroization while alive.
- 4 On the possible talismanic powers of the sacred wreaths, see Kurke (1993); but cf. Kyriakou (2007). Des Bouvrie (2012, 75) suggests that athletes at Olympia competed as “part of a ritual process” and were in a liminal state with a “status betwixt and between human and heroic existence.”
- 5 Spivey (2011), discussing Pythagoras and Milo of Kroton, suggests that athletes were drawn to early Olympia by hopes of heroization as a form of immortality.
- 6 See Lee (1983); Golden (1998, 74–88); Kantzios (2004); Agocs, Carey, and Rawles, eds. (2012). For essays on Pindar’s works, patrons, and influence, see Hornblower and Morgan, eds. (2007).
- 7 See Scanlon (2002, 274–322) on the athletic tension between the desire to win and the dangers of injury and death.
- 8 On Pindar’s defense of the victor’s service to the state and his social reintegration, see Kurke (1991, 240–56).
- 9 Lefkowitz (1984, 18–24). O’Sullivan (2003) examines Pindar’s championing of verbal over visual media. On victory odes and statues, see Spivey (2012, 139–69).
- 10 On athletes in society, see Pleket (1992, 2010, 161–3); Kyle (1997); Young (1984, 147–70, 2004, 92–101); Golden (1998, 141–69); Miller (2000, 2004, 207–15); Pritchard (2003, 2013, 34–46); Christesen (2012, 135–83, 2014a).
- 11 For example, see Kyle (1997). Pleket (1989) applies “mass sport” to the

expansion of athletic festivals in Hellenistic and Roman time, but he does not use “democratization.”

- 12 On Miller’s (2002) argument about equality and fairness in sport, see Chapter 4.
- 13 See Christesen’s valuable comparative study of sport and democracy in ancient and modern societies (2012, 119–83).
- 14 On notions of Greek agonistic exceptionalism and aristocratic amateurism in the historiography of ancient Greek sport before Gardiner, see Ulf (2011).
- 15 See Kyle ([1991] 2010). Harris (1972) and (1964) echo Gardiner; see Young (1984, 12–4, 90–2, 166–9). Cf. Harris (1972, 187–97), on the lessons of Greek sport, the corruptive influence of spectator sport, and the decline of rugby football.
- 16 Pleket (1974, 2–10, 1992, 2001, 2005, 2010).
- 17 Young (1984, 156–7) admits that some stories about early athletes “smack of myth,” but he points out that Greeks found them “not incredible.”
- 18 Miller (2004, 106) cites a story in Diogenes Laertius (*Diogenes* 6.49) suggesting that an Olympic victor later grazed sheep.
- 19 Hornblower (2007, 206) suggests that over 1100 choral performers (boys and men) were involved annually “in the City Dionysia alone” by c. 450.
- 20 Christesen (2012), using modern sport sociological theory, argues that mass sport, widely defined, assists socialization and social order in both ancient and modern states.
- 21 Pritchard (2003, 299–300, 324–31) disagrees with Fisher’s suggestions that significant numbers of boys and men participated in the tribal dithyrambic contests and that these contests assisted tribal solidarity. Pritchard (2004) 228 concludes that dithyrambic choruses did not increase participation but rather “... combined elite boys and men from different regions of Attike...”
- 22 Lee (2012) 214 comments: “The is no more contentious issue in the study of Greek sport, and no resolution in sight.”
- 23 Christesen (2014a, 216) points out that Athens had more gymnasia and training facilities than Pritchard’s some 1000 “rich” citizens alone needed, but the proliferation and embellishment of facilities was not just about need. Political patronage, tyranny, and competitive interstate patriotic display probably were factors. Olympia itself did not really need a gymnasium but acquired one as a Ptolemaic benefaction (see Chapter 12).

- 24 Christesen (2014a, 226–30) clarifies that most poorer citizens, with their farmers’ tans and “white bottoms,” needed to work and did not regularly participate in sport: (230) “... there was a dark side to the tale of sport and democratization in ancient Greece, because, while sport helped build egalitarian, unified groups of *plousioi* and *penetes*, it also contributed meaningfully to the social and political exclusion of other members of Greek communities, most notably *ptochoi*.”
- 25 Crowther (1991, 166) and (1996, 42) concludes that the distance and the training period at Olympia would deter mediocre, unsubsidized, less affluent athletes. Cash subsidies for food at Roman athletic festivals need not be relevant for early Greece.
- 26 Young (1984, 134–46) made a strong circumstantial argument for state support at Kroton, and subsidization probably would have emerged first in ambitious colonial states, but we have no certain evidence of subsidization for the Classical era.
- 27 See Kyle (1987, 136–7); Young (1984, 100–3); Pleket (1992, 151, [1975] 2010, 162).

Females and Greek Sport

The Eleans have a law to throw off these cliffs [near Olympia] any women who are discovered at the Olympic festival, or even on the Olympia side of the Alpheios [River] on the days which are forbidden to women.

Pausanias 5.6.7, trans. Miller 2012, no. 149

One dramatic change in the Modern Olympics since 1896 is the presence of female athletes. We have come a long way since 1896, but sometimes, seeking validation and heroines, we still look back to Olympia and Greece. Historically, however, Greek female sport was never as prominent as male sport. Male athletics were applauded as a marker of Greek masculine excellence, but—except in Sparta—motherhood and the family home largely circumscribed the social role of females. Xenophon (*Oec.* 10.9), for example, said that women’s work tasks sufficed for their “exercise.” Nevertheless, some sporting experiences were important in the lives of Greek females and relevant to larger gender issues.¹

This chapter on females (girls and women, by age and biological nature) and Greek sport surveys the significance of sport for Greek girls and women, from local rituals to physical education and competition in major festivals, from early Greece to the Roman Empire. Greek society of the Archaic and Classical periods offered few opportunities for females to compete physically in contests that were arguably athletic (i.e., with high-level public competitions for prizes). Female sport typically involved unmarried young girls (*parthenoi*) in rituals of transition or initiation, in preparation for marriage. Spartan female physical education, with its contests and processions, and indirect female equestrian victories at Olympia (females owned horses but did not personally participate in the races) were anomalous (see [Chapter 9](#)). Women in fact were banned from attending the Olympics, but some scholars suggest that virgin girls could attend, and ancient sources claim that one mother defied the ban to watch her son compete.

After the Classical period, attitudes to female sport changed significantly. Encouraged by the Ptolemaic kings of Alexandria, Greek royal females of the Hellenistic period became prominent, albeit still indirect, equestrian victors. Also, although direct female competition in track and field and combat sports remained limited, wealthy Hellenistic women might be officials and benefactors of gymnasiums. During the Roman period, traditional Greek female sporting rituals continued, and opportunities for female sporting competitors increased within the burgeoning system of Greco-Roman

spectacles and games. Ironically, the “golden age” of Greek female sport was not Classical Greece but rather the Early Roman Empire.

The Ancient Evidence: Problems and Perspectives

Evidence for Greek female sport comes in various forms but not in great quantities. Virtually, all our evidence was produced by males and reflects male perceptions of proper female conduct. Greek males usually recorded female physical activities only if they were seen as odd, improper, or erotic. As Pericles said of female excellence in his Funeral Oration (Thuc. 2.45.2), women should not be lesser than their nature, and they should not be talked about by men positively or negatively.

Works of literature starting with the Homeric poems mention Greek females dancing, usually in choruses. This socially important and apparently ubiquitous activity let girls publicly display their beauty and grace, but scholars disagree on whether dancing was musical, educational, sporting, or fully “athletic.” Pindar’s victory odes, commissioned by males, celebrate only male victors. Xenophon (writing c. 390 BCE), however, is a crucial source on female activities in Classical Sparta, and recently discovered Hellenistic victory epigrams by Posidippos enrich our evidence for Ptolemaic royal female equestrian victors. Greek and Roman authors in the Roman era, including Plutarch, Suetonius, and Pausanias, mention Greek female sport, but they must be used cautiously concerning Greek sport of earlier periods.

The relevant material evidence includes a limited number of vase-paintings depicting females involved in sport. Those vases must, however, be interpreted carefully, since some are intended as illustrations of scenes from myth, and most such images are filtered through the male gaze. Figurines and sculptures of possibly athletic girls may depict female sport or may be tokens celebrating ritual activities. Females in apparent sporting contexts appear occasionally in art into the late Roman era, as in a mosaic from Piazza Armerina (see [Figure 11.2](#)), but interpretations of such representations vary (Lee 1984). Invaluable testimony comes from inscriptions, ranging from the fourth-century BCE epigram of a female Spartan Olympic victor to records of female victories in athletic festivals in Roman times.

Early Greece: Epic and Myth

Female recreations in the cultures of the Aegean Bronze Age included dancing, acrobatics, and ball games. Minoan art depicts females dancing and attending public performances, but Minoan scenes of vigorous boxing and bull leaping represent exclusively male initiation rites (Rutter 2014, 39–40; cf. Scanlon 1999).

In Homer's funeral games for Patroklos in *Iliad* 23, two unnamed females are mentioned, but only as prizes. They are objectified, like Achilles' Briseis, as valuable plunder, symbols of the physical excellence of the males who control them. Similarly, Penelope is the prize in the suitor contest in archery in *Odyssey* 21. In Phaiakian *Odyssey* 6, the princess Nausikaa and her handmaids play catch with balls while washing clothes, but at the games in the Phaiakian marketplace in *Odyssey* 8, females watch but do not compete.

Greek myths depict Atalanta as an athletic female who broke gender norms. Abandoned in the wilderness to die by her father, who wanted only sons, she was suckled by a bear and raised by hunters (Ael.VH 13.1, Hyg.*Fab.*185), and she became a great runner and hunter devoted to Artemis. Vase-paintings depict her running and wrestling in skimpy sport attire (the *diazoma*), but such scenes, with erotic overtones, were produced for males. Not letting her father choose her husband, Atalanta instead raced against suitors for her hand. Many suitors failed until one tricked her by dropping golden apples. As T. Scanlon (2002, 175–98; similarly Golden 1998, 134–7) explains, this is a myth of inversion, like that of the Amazons, in which a nonconforming female is defeated and tamed by a male, ultimately reinforcing social norms. Accordingly, in Plato's myth of Er (*Resp.* 620b), Atalanta chooses to have her soul reborn as a male athlete because, if reborn as a female, she could not win the great honors and rewards available to male athletes. Early Greece, then, seems inhospitable to seriously sporting females, until we turn to Sparta in the Archaic period.

Spartan Female Sport

Despite problems with non-Spartan and often late evidence, Archaic and Classical Sparta clearly was exceptional in its state program of female physical education, with exercises, dancing, running, and more for girls.² The purpose of this system was to produce beautiful, fit, and well-socialized brides and mothers who would produce the healthy future citizen soldiers needed by Sparta. (On Spartan girls possibly competing outside Sparta, see page 213 later on the Heraia.) Outsiders, especially Athenians, depicted Spartan women as assertive and independent, but Spartan female sport ended with marriage.

Athenian Girls' Races or Rites

Like most Greek girls, Athenian girls were socially conditioned for their domestic roles as wives and mothers. Young girls had toys and pets but few recreational outlets, and they married early and concentrated on their homes and families. Before marrying, however, some girls (either all who wished or certain selected girls; Mantas 1995, 126) participated in rites called the

Arkteia. These rites took place away from the city at sanctuaries at Brauron and Mounichion and dedicated to Artemis, goddess of young animals and of transitional periods. Called *arktoi* or “bears,” these girls owed service to the goddess because, according to myth, a girl had caused the death of a bear, an animal sacred to Artemis. Fragments of fifth-century ritual vases from the sanctuaries depict young girls of different ages, nude or in short saffron-colored tunics, near altars, apparently running awkwardly with their hands stretched out in front—perhaps imitating bears or fleeing from females costumed as bears. Some understand this as an athletic race, but Scanlon (2002, 139–74) sees a ritual chase, analogous to a hunt, as part of an initiation rite in which the girls fled from society and were pursued and tamed before returning to society. Alternatively, G. Ferrari (2002, 162–78) feels the girls performed a ritual circular dance that marked them as legitimate Athenian citizen females who could marry and bear citizen sons.

Such socially important rites of passage for girls, which signaled their progress toward or preparedness for marriage, typically involved special costumes and ritual activities performed in seclusion in all-female environments (Sourvinou-Inwood 1988, 15–105; cf. Langenfeld 2006, 176–7). Although generally ignored by the male-dominated historical record, similar rites were widespread throughout Greece, including at Olympia.

The Heraia at Olympia

Writing in the late second-century CE, Pausanias (5.16.2–8) records that every fourth year, to honor Hera, goddess of marriage, young girls ran footraces in three age categories in the stadium at Olympia. Sixteen women from the region of Elis supervised the races, and they also wove a robe for Hera and organized two choral dances. Winners in the races received olive wreaths, a portion of meat from the sacrifice of a cow, and permission to dedicate inscribed “icons” (*ikones*, Paus. 5.16.3), perhaps statues or painted images bearing their names. Debate, however, continues about the history, participants, icons, timing, and scope of the races (Scanlon 2002, 98–120, 2008, 163–4). That the girls’ races were one-sixth shorter in length than the male sprints (Paus. 5.16.3) is taken by M. Golden (1998, 130–2) as an example of a “discourse of difference” in Greek sport.³ He argues that the race was staged that way to emphasize male athletic superiority: “Women ... were kept from competitive comparisons which might challenge prevailing hierarchies” (1998, 139). On the other hand, S. Pomeroy (2002, 24) says, “The women’s race at the Heraia in Elis was the most prestigious, the equivalent for women of the Olympic competitions held for men.”

Pausanias (5.16.3) says the girls ran with long hair, wearing short shifts, and with the right breast exposed. Interpreting that costume as the *exomis*, a shirt worn by male manual workers, N. Serwint (1993) sees the races as a

prenuptial initiation rite in which the girls temporarily experienced the “other” by briefly pretending to be male.

Scanlon (2002, 113–16, 120) proposes that an early initiatory cult under Spartan influence was reorganized on a Panhellenic basis around 580, if not earlier, but again our evidence presents challenges. Pausanias, our earliest and only written testimony, says (5.16.4) the Eleans credit the races to “ancient times,” and to explain the rite, they tell a myth that Hippodameia founded the footraces to thank Hera for her marriage to Pelops.⁴

Assuming an early Heraia open to non-Elean girls, some scholars suggest that most winners were Spartans (Pomeroy 2002, 24–7, 115). A small uninscribed sixth-century figurine of Spartan workmanship (found in the area of ancient Epiros, modern Kosovo) exactly fits Pausanias’ description of the Heraian costume (see [Figure 11.1](#)). Like similar examples (see Scanlon 2002, 101–6, figs. 4.3–4, 2008, 164–8), this was not a stand-alone figurine but an attachment to a larger vessel; and Pomeroy (2002, 12–13, n. 97 on 25) and others have noted that the girl’s pose, with her head turned backward, may be one of dancing. Also the girl’s holding of the hem of her tunic perhaps better suits dancing rather than vigorous running. There is no other firm evidence for saying that non-Elean girls traveled to a Panhellenic Heraia (see Langenfeld 2006, 179–83; but cf. Scanlon 2008, 177–84).



Figure 11.1 Figurine of a running or dancing girl, c. 520–500 BCE.

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Figure 11.2 “Bikini Girls” mosaic. Sicily, Piazza Armerina. 350–400 CE.

© Leonard de Selva/Corbis.

A Roman sculpture of a running girl in the Vatican Museum (Museo Pio-Clementino inv. 2784; Scanlon 2008, 175–7), perhaps a copy of an original Greek victor statue of c. 460, includes a palm and seems to refer to the Heraia. Her costume is similar to that of the figurine just mentioned (i.e., right breast bare), but her tunic is shorter in length and gathered under her breasts, and she does not hold the hem. The dating and identification of the sculpture are much debated (e.g., Arrigoni 1985a, 122–3; Langenfeld 2006, 169–70). Since a full statue of a mortal female seems out of scale for a Heraian *ikon* (Langenfeld 2006, 171), the Roman sculptor perhaps copied a statue of a mythological figure, namely, Chloris, granddaughter of Zeus and niece of Hippodameia (Paus. 5.16.4), who in myth ran the first race to Hera. In fact, even if the races for Hera were quite old and open to non-Elean girls, with three victors per quadrennial festival, we still lack the name of any historical victor.

Scanlon (2002, 117–18, 287, 2008, 184–92) and others suggest that the Heraia took place, for logistical reasons (e.g., preparation of the track), just before the men’s games, that male spectators could attend, that fathers brought their daughters to race, and that maidens lingered with their fathers and watched nude male athletes to meet suitors and experience the “male world” (e.g., Dillon 2000; Instone 1990). Such suggestions seem historically anachronistic for Classical Olympia (Kyle 2007, 138–41). Fathers went to the Olympics for an athletic, homosocial environment, not to attend to the safety of their virgin daughters—with their wives absent—amidst thousands of males.⁵ Beyond the four-year cycle, we do not know when the Heraia was scheduled. Women’s

rites were usually held in seclusion, and the Heraia was probably separate and segregated in time and attendance from the Olympics. As P. Christesen (2012, 129) says, “Other than using the same stadium, the Heraia Games had no known connection to the Olympics.”

However ancient the girls’ races may have been, Pausanias describes the Heraia of his own day, a contest that probably had changed over time. The costume and age groups suit an early initiation rite, as at Brauron, but the prizes and permission to dedicate an inscribed *ikon* suggest additions from the male games.

The Olympic Ban on Women

Females could watch athletic festivals at most sites in Greece (Dillon 2000, 457–9; Scanlon 2002, 219–26), but the Olympics retained an old sacral ban against women attending to participate or spectate. Suggestions that maidens attended the male Olympics take inspiration from Pausanias, who at one point (5.6.7) says that women (*gynaikes*) were banned from the Olympic sanctuary and areas near it (on the Olympia side of the Alpheios River) on the days forbidden to women (i.e., during the male games). Any woman caught breaking the ban was to be killed by being thrown from a height, which suggests concerns about religious contamination of the festival.⁶ Elsewhere, however, Pausanias says (6.20.8–9) that the priestess of Demeter Chamyne sat on an altar and watched the Olympics, and also (6.20.9) that maidens (*parthenoi*) “are not forbidden to watch” the games. Perhaps maidens could watch the male games because they were asexual, or perhaps individual maidens might watch the games if granted the honor of serving as (or attending to) the priestess of Demeter.⁷

Also relevant to the ban on women is Pausanias’ story (5.6.7–8, 6.7.2) of a widowed mother, called Kallipateira or Pherenike, from a family (the Diagorids) with multiple Olympic victors. Supposedly, she took her son to compete at Olympia (possibly in 404), and, in disguise, she defied the ban and watched him compete. When he won, the excited mother jumped over a fence, exposed herself as a woman, and was apprehended, but she was not punished at all out of respect for her family’s athletic achievements.

Apparently, the story of Pherenike became confused and inflated in sources over time (Kyle 2007, 135–8; cf. Scanlon 2008, 189–91). Consider Pausanias’ account (6.7.4–5, two sections after 6.7.2 on Pherenike) of how Pherenike’s brother Dorieus was captured fighting against Athens and brought to Athens in 407. Pausanias (similarly Xen.*Hell.* 1.5.19) says the Athenians let him go without punishment because he was a famous Olympic victor. Apparently, Pausanias confused two stories about the siblings. Pherenike’s supposed disguise and exposure stem from her gender, and her release at Olympia comes from her brother’s release at Athens. Later sources (e.g., Ael. *VH* 10.1,

Philostr.*Gym.* 17) embellished Pausanias' story to ridiculous lengths.

By Pausanias' time, the sporting world had become more accustomed to ambitious royal women and greater women's involvement in sport, so he perhaps accepted inflated stories about females from the perspective of his own age.⁸ Sporting tales tend to become taller, not truer, with time.

Hellenistic Females and Competition

As noted, Classical Greece offered few opportunities for female sport, especially after marriage, except for indirect equestrian competition, as demonstrated by Kyniska. Circumstances changed, however, after Alexander's conquests spread Greeks into Near Eastern and Egyptian societies with traditions of prominent, powerful queens, and with generally better female status and rights than in Greece. The Hellenistic period (323–31 BCE) brought more female involvement in education and public life, and more high-profile female equestrian competition. An important example of this phenomenon is found in Egypt, where a Macedonian Greek family, the Ptolemies, became rulers after Alexander's death in 323 and maintained their hold on power until the death of Cleopatra VII in 30 BCE.

The Ptolemies, adapting to a cultural milieu of pharaohs and “Great Royal Wives,” allowed and encouraged royal female initiative and political involvement. Like Philip II of Macedonia (see [Chapter 12](#)), the Ptolemies, especially Ptolemy II, used sport to legitimize their rule, to assert their Greek ethnicity, and to publicize themselves as wealthy and powerful.⁹ They established athletic festivals in Egypt, including the Ptolemaia in Alexandria; they built facilities and subsidized Greco-Macedonian athletes who competed at an elite level; they patronized Olympia with benefactions; and male and female members of the royal court accumulated flattering equestrian victories at Panhellenic games and at Athens' Panathenaic Games.

We had long known, from Pausanias and other sources, that Ptolemy II and his wife and sister Arsinoë both won Olympic chariot victories. Ptolemy's courtesan, Belistiche of Macedonia, also won Olympic equestrian victories (in the four-colt chariot race in 268 and in the two-colt chariot race in 264). Berenike II, wife of Ptolemy III Euergetes, competed and won various races in Greece, including the Olympic chariot race in 248, and the poet Callimachus prepared a victory ode for her Nemean equestrian wins.¹⁰

Our knowledge of Ptolemaic equestrian achievements has been greatly enriched by the recent discovery of a papyrus containing a corpus of epigrams by Posidippos of Pella, third-century court poet to Ptolemies I and II. The corpus includes a section (the *Hippika*) with 18 epigrams praising equestrian victories at Olympia and elsewhere by male and female members and associates of the royal court.¹¹ Raising issues of ethnicity, gender, and propaganda in sport, the new poems offer insights into the aspirations and

self-representation of Hellenistic rulers.¹²

An epigram celebrating an Olympic win by Berenike I, wife of Ptolemy I, is particularly relevant because it echoes Kyniska's epigram.¹³ Speaking in the voice of the victorious horses, it reads: "When we were still fillies, we won the Olympic crown of Macedonian Berenike ... and with it we took away the long-standing glory of Kyniska in Sparta." Another epigram (AB 88, trans. van Bremen 2007, 371), speaking in the voice of Berenike's son Ptolemy II, says: "To my father's great fame I add my own, but that my mother won a chariot-race as a woman, *that* is truly great."

Another, longer epigram (AB 78) praises Ptolemaic Olympic chariot victories over three generations: by Ptolemy I, his wife Berenike I, Ptolemy II, and his daughter Berenike II, and also three wins in the same competition by Arsinoë II, wife, and sister of Ptolemy II. As noted earlier, Berenike II also won chariot races at Nemea (AB 79).

Whether these female victors just sent chariots or actually attended the contests at which their horses won, the idea of noble females competing in equestrian events at major games—and commemorating their wins—spread in Hellenistic times. The expansion of Olympia's program of events, with the addition of a two-colt chariot race in 264, and a race for colts in 256, provided further opportunities for female Olympic victories. As K. Mantas notes (1995, 128–9; see also van Bremen 2007, 368–9), several inscriptions record "women victors in horse-races from the fourth century BC onwards at Olympia, Attica, Thessaly, and the Aegean islands." Second-century Panathenaic victor lists record female participation by Ptolemaic (e.g., Cleopatra II, sister and consort of Ptolemy VI) and other noble females, facilitated by an expanded equestrian program and grants of honorary citizenship (Shear 2007).

Inscriptions show that female involvement—at least peripherally—with other forms of sport increased in Hellenistic (and Roman) times. Women sponsored gymnasiums and produced games (as gymnasiarchs and *agonothetai*). Females were also indirectly involved in the educational systems of gymnasia, which were no longer exclusively male.¹⁴ Apparently, female personal participation in sport other than equestrian events remained largely a matter of initiatory rites during the Hellenistic period, but developments during that time set the stage for the emergence in the Roman era of an environment more amenable to female sport.

Female Athletics in the Roman Empire

Although Romans supposedly were suspicious of Greek sport (see [Chapter 13](#)), female participation and spectatorship became more public within Rome's eclectic and spectacular "performance culture." At Rome, women and Vestal Virgins attended the circus and amphitheater, females used the baths,

and female gladiators fought.¹⁵ Roman attitudes toward these activities may have been conditioned in part by Hellenistic (and Etruscan) traditions concerning elite females, including more public roles and influence than in Classical Greece. Roman expansion also brought exposure to Greek female sporting rituals, Spartan and Hellenistic female equestrian victories, and the fame of Spartan female physical education, which probably was intensified by post-Classical Spartan educational reforms.¹⁶ Contests for Greek females, primarily races for maidens, increased under the Empire, and they began to form part of some prominent athletic festivals. Augustus probably played a major role in this development, but other emperors, notably Domitian, followed suit.

Augustus personally had reservations about Roman women watching nude male athletics (Suet.*Aug.* 43.4), but he supported Greek sport. He and his wife Livia had strong ties to Sparta,¹⁷ and his successors in the Julio-Claudian dynasty established or expanded festivals with female events to honor women of the imperial household (Mantas 1995, 134, 142). An inscription of 25 CE from Corinth records that a Roman official, as *agonothetes* of the Tiberea Caesarea Sebasta (a festival to the emperor) and the Isthmian and Caesarean games, established some sort of contest for maidens (*certamen virginum*, probably a short footrace) as well as a poetry contest in honor of the “divine Julia Augusta” (i.e., Livia).¹⁸ Another inscription from Roman Sparta records a victory in a footrace (*diaulos*) for girls in a festival established by Tiberius or Claudius to honor Livia (*SEG* 11. 830; see Mantas 1995, 134).

The Augustalia or Sebastan Games founded at Naples to honor Augustus in 2 CE came at some point to include a girls’ footrace. In 154 CE, the husband of Seia Spes honored his wife’s victory in the *stadion* race for daughters of magistrates at Naples.¹⁹ Since she was married at the time of the commemoration, she probably won the race before her marriage.²⁰

The best evidence for girls competing at major athletic contests comes from a statue base erected in 47 CE for a monument at Delphi that once included statues of three girls. The inscription, which records the victories of three daughters of Hermesianax of the city of Tralles, provides the earliest known names of historical female victors in nonequestrian sports.²¹ It records that Tryphosa won the *stadion* twice at the Pythian Games and once at the Isthmian Games, “first of the virgins.” Hedeia won the *stadion* at the Nemean Games and at an athletic contest at Sikyon, and also the “chariot race in armor” at the Isthmian Games, and a contest in kithara-singing in the boys’ category at the Sebastan Games at Athens. Dionysia won the *stadion* at the Isthmian Games and in the games of Asklepios at Epidauros. The three girls probably won sprints against other girls, but Hedeia’s win in the “chariot race in armor” might have been against males, and her win in kithara-singing probably was against boys. Note that, although these ambitious girls won nine times at some six festivals over at least four years, there is no reference to the

Heraia. Were they seeking wins at more prestigious festivals?

The last Julio-Claudian emperor, Nero, enthusiastic about Greek culture and sport, invited the Vestal Virgins, not just the priestess of Vesta, to witness athletic contests at Rome, arguing that the priestess of Demeter at Olympia could watch the Olympics (Suet.*Ner.* 12.4). He also supposedly imported female wrestlers to Rome to perform, and shocked audiences watched a Roman senator wrestle a female Spartan.²² In 86 CE, the Flavian emperor Domitian established in Rome the Capitoline Games, which apparently included a footrace for maidens (of unknown identity) in his new stadium (Suet.*Dom.* 4.4; Dio Cass.67.8.1).

At Antioch in 181 CE, maidens from elite families, under a vow of chastity, competed against each other in Olympian games in running and wrestling (John Malalas *Chron.* 12.10.288–9). Around 200 CE, the emperor Septimius Severus arranged some sort of female athletic contests at Rome with large numbers of participants (Dio Cass. 75.16.1). Finally, the “Bikini Girls” in a fourth-century CE mosaic at Piazza Armerina in Sicily are so-named because of their brief attire (see [Figure 11.2](#)). Except for one wearing a himation (cloak) and seemingly judging the activities, the girls appear to be practicing or competing in games (running, jumping with weights, and tossing a ball), and some bear palms and crowns symbolic of victory, leading Lee (1984) to accept them as athletes, not entertainers.²³

Conclusion: from Rites to Athletics

In Classical Greece, public athletic competitions were male performances, and female sporting activities were a significant but lesser element in Greek sport. Outside Sparta, Classical Greek female sport consisted of footraces by young maidens in rites of passage, notably at the Heraia. Girls engaged in sport, if at all, briefly before marriage, and married females perhaps recreated (e.g., played ball, knucklebones) at or near home, but they did not personally compete at games in public.

Classical Sparta’s female physical education, with running and wrestling among girls, was notoriously exceptional, and it probably intensified in post-Classical times, inspiring comments in later sources, but it too ended with marriage.

Mature Greek women competed only indirectly via horseracing, as Kyniska did. Hellenistic noble females were prominent as equestrian victors, and women might patronize *gymnasia* as gymnasiarchs and benefactors, but beyond Sparta, intense athletic competition remained a male prerogative.

The Roman era brought more sporting access for daughters of nobles and officials. Julio-Claudian emperors expanded opportunities for female competitors in festivals to honor imperial females, and the inscription of

Hermesianax shows that females competed at major games such as the Pythia. Nero, Domitian, and Septimius Severus staged short-lived female events at Rome, and the “Bikini Girls” suggest lingering interest in Greek female sport beyond Rome, but ultimately, Greek female sport was undermined by early Christianity’s views concerning females and the body.

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Notes

- 1 Harris (1966, 179–86); Arrigoni (1985); des Bouvrie (1995); Golden (1998, 123–40); Scanlon (2002 98–198); Miller (2004, 150–9); Kyle (2007, 131–52, 2014).
- 2 On Spartan female physical education, possible representations of Spartan females on Athenian vase-paintings, and Spartan Kyniska's Olympic chariot racing, see Chapter 9.
- 3 Applying anthropological theory, des Bouvrie (2012) suggests that Olympia was unusual in having male as well as female contests, and that the arrangements, use of space, and rituals "suggest that some of the meanings of the festival [i.e., the 'Olympia-cum-Heraia'] were to celebrate the categories of male and female nature ..." (66). She notes (64–5) that the female festival, focused on marriage, was held at a different time and on a lesser scale.
- 4 See Harris (1966, 179–80); Langenfeld (2006, 157–62).
- 5 Scanlon (2008, 187) feels Aristophanes (*Ach.* 253–8) supports the idea that fathers brought girls to festivals to meet suitors, but a comedic reference to Athens' nonathletic Rural Dionysia has little relevance to the male Olympics.
- 6 On gender-exclusive festivals and associations of women with pollution, see Cole (1995).
- 7 See Kyle (2007, 138–41); cf. Scanlon (2008, 191–2). On relevant inscriptions from Ephesos, see Robert (1974, 176–81).
- 8 König (2005, 158–204) shows that Pausanias and others presented earlier Greek athletics refracted through the lens of contemporary concerns of Greeks under the Roman Empire.
- 9 van Bremen (2007); Remijsen (2010, 101–6, 2014, 350–5).
- 10 Harris (1972, 177–9); Golden (1998, 87–8, 133–4).
- 11 van Bremen (2007, esp. 360–4); Golden (2008, 16–23); Remijsen (2010, 101–6).

- 12 See Bennett (2005); van Bremen (2007, 349–54, 369–72); Golden (2008, 19–23); Millender (2009, 35–41).
- 13 Austin and Bastianini (2002, AB 87); trans. van Bremen (2007, 371).
- 14 Mantas (1995, 129–31, 136–40); van Bremen (1996, 66–81, 148–9); Bielman (1998, 33–50); Scanlon (2002, 348, n. 80).
- 15 On female gladiators and female spectators, see Brunet (2014) and Chapter 15.
- 16 Potter (2012, 252–7) suggests that the later, reformed Spartan model of female athletics inspired interest and imitation at Rome and in the Greek East.
- 17 Cartledge and Spawforth (2002, 94–6, 98–9, 102–3, 205–6).
- 18 Kent (1966, no. 153, 28–9, 70–3); Lee (1988, 104 and n. 7); Mantas (1995, 132).
- 19 *SEG* 14.602; see Mantas (1995, 132); Golden (1998, 127–8).
- 20 On a Sebastan victory by one Thalassia of Ephesos, see Chapter 14.
- 21 This inscription, *SIG*³ 802, is translated in Miller (2012, no. 162) and discussed by Lee (1988) and Mantas (1995, 132–3).
- 22 *Schol.ad Juv.* 4.53; Cartledge and Spawforth (2002, 206).
- 23 For possible Christian symbolism in the mosaic, see Simpson (2003).

Macedon and Hellenistic Sport and Spectacle

Alexander loved neither fame of all kinds nor recognition from everyone, unlike his father Philip, who acted like a sophist in his pride in the power of his speeches, and stamped his coins with his chariot victories at Olympia.

Plutarch, *Alexander* 4.5, trans. Miller 2012, no. 139

Traditionally sport historians presented the Hellenistic age as a period of athletic decline, debased professionalism, increased brutality, and idle spectatorship, a feeble shadow of earlier Greek sport soon to be overwhelmed and further corrupted by Rome. Instead, the Hellenistic age should be approached as an exciting new age of expansion and adaptation, of interactions and transitions, first between Classical Greece and the Near East, and then between the Hellenistic world and Rome. Just as Archaic Greek colonization spread outposts around the Mediterranean on the fringes of non-Greek societies—new city-states which declared their ethnicity and wealth through athletic victors and their own games—the Hellenistic age spread sporting Greeks and new urban centers throughout the Near Eastern world. New states hosted or patronized games, creating new ones and subsidizing their competitors, in pursuit of publicity and status.

The Hellenistic age was a time of discourse, dialogue, and cross-fertilization in the history of sport. Sporting traditions were resilient, and the contacts of Hellenistic Greeks with other peoples brought cultural interaction. Games were transportable cultural traditions to be retained, defended, extended, or resisted as expressions of identity and power. Sporting patronage and spectacular imperial productions were effective elements in the cultural imperialism of Hellenistic kingdoms and in the hegemonic and hierarchical agendas of Hellenistic cities. Later, this tradition of acceptance and assimilation in terms of sport and spectacle influenced Rome's ultimately eclectic repertoire of performances.

Earlier Greek games and festivals hardly lacked spectacularity, but Hellenistic (and later Roman) spectacles became increasingly elaborate as leaders and states used spectacles to define themselves, to fashion and express their collective and personal identities. The Greek world entered a new age of spectacle, stagecraft, theatrics, and showmanship in the fourth century. Hellenistic kings (and in time Roman emperors) used politicized spectacles in more elaborate and sophisticated ways: a “theatrical mentality” emerged,

technological devices, illusions, and secularization became more prominent, and actors and athletes became more “professional.” Kings and emperors carefully produced spectacles, and they themselves appeared, in effect performing, prominently in the stands—carefully positioned, posed, and attired for effect, projecting a public persona of power and generosity like Near Eastern monarchs of old.¹

We already noted proto-Hellenistic developments in fourth-century Greece (e.g., Nemea, see [Chapter 7](#)) including architectural elaboration and increased spectatorship, with probable Macedonian influence. Greece experienced a political and economic shift from independent city-states to larger kingdoms and empires, a transition the old Near East and its monarchs had made centuries earlier. Mega-states need spectacular monumentalization in production and commemoration in art. The geographical scope of larger political units meant that Hellenistic kings had to use more elaborate spectacles of the capital and palace, as well as old and new agonistic festivals, to broadcast their messages. Greeks adapted to such traditions even as they spread to their sport to the Near East.

Greeks and Persians

Alexander’s expansion of Greco-Macedonian regimes to the vast expanses of the Persian Empire came after a long intermittent period of exposure. Herodotus and Lucian contrast Greek and non-Greek sporting prizes and customs for literary effect, but Greeks and Persians were not ignorant about each other’s cultures. Ionian Greeks came under Persian control in the late sixth century, and Demokedes of Kroton was detained as a physician at the court of King Darius I in the late sixth century, but he escaped and later married the daughter of Milo of Kroton (Hdt. 3.129–33). Macedon was a subject or ally of Persia from 492 on, and the sister of Alexander I of Macedon was married to a Persian. The ousted Spartan king and Olympic chariot victor Demaratos accompanied Xerxes into Greece in 480, and the pankratiast Poulydamas visited the Persian court of Darius II c. 404 BCE (see [Chapter 10](#)).

Xenophon’s account of the march of the 10,000 mercenaries into and out of Persia shows that the Greeks held impromptu games on campaign. In 401, at the city of Peltae in Asia Minor, Xenias the Arcadian organized a festival, the Lykaia to Zeus Lykaios, with sacrifices and games; golden strigils were the prizes and Cyrus (aspirant to the Persian throne) was a spectator (*Anab.* 1.2.10). Later, in 400 at Trapezus on the Black Sea, the Greeks held more games, including footraces, combat events, and equestrian contests (4.8.25–8; Golden 1998, 1–6). The Spartan Drakontios organized these games, selected the site for the racecourse, and received the hides from the sacrifice (presumably for use as prizes; 4.8.26). Xenophon says that the games were a

“fine spectacle” (*kale thea*) and that the spectators were very animated—shouting, laughing, and cheering. Familiar games provided cultural comfort and diversion for these Greek soldiers in a foreign land.

Greek-Persian contacts continued. Like Xenophon, his friend King Agesilaos of Sparta apparently discounted the value of athletics at home, but on his early fourth-century campaigns in Asia Minor, his interest in cavalry, military exercises, and hunting was compatible with Persian customs. Persian military leaders gave prizes to the contingents of soldiers that best performed military drills (Xen. *Cyr.* 1.2.12, 1.6.18). Also Xenophon later created a “hunting park” near Skillos and held an annual sacrifice and feast to Artemis, with animals (boar, roe deer, stags) hunted by Xenophon, his sons, and other citizens (*Anab.* 5.3.7–10).

Greek and Near Eastern sporting traditions, one based on city-states and the other on empires, with different notions about costumes, prizes, and military value, made large-scale adaptation unlikely without conquest, but conquest came only after the west was unified by the intrigues and armies of Macedon.

Philip II: Proclaiming Greekness through Games

We now reject the old image of Macedon as an undeveloped, backwater hinterland. Early Macedon was a tribal territory but, with Thrace, it was rich and cosmopolitan, with strong native traditions of hunting, music, and banqueting, as well as elaborate burials (and probably funeral games). It had interacted with eastern peoples, from Phrygians to Persians, for centuries, but Macedonians were fully Greek in their own minds. Close to Mount Olympus and the Olympian gods, they spoke a Greek dialect, wrote inscriptions in Greek, and knew their Homer and mythology. They were half-caste Greeks only in the chauvinistic rhetoric of Greek states that distrusted Macedon.

We had underestimated Macedonian sport because the first certain Macedonian Olympic victor may be as late as King Philip II in the fourth century. Herodotus (5.22) tells the suspicious story that Alexander I, son of King Amyntas of Macedon (498–454 BCE), wanted to compete at Olympia, but his Greek opponents tried to exclude him as a non-Greek. After he proved his descent from Argos, and therefore his eligibility, he supposedly entered the footrace and tied for first.² If historical, the story may reflect an Elean ethnic bias against their cousins to the northeast, but it may have been legitimizing propaganda as Alexander sought to reinforce his succession by claiming Greek status and (almost) an Olympic victory. The story may be unreliable, but a bronze tripod of the second half of the fifth century inscribed with “I am from the games of Argive Hera” was found in the late fourth-century “Tomb of Philip” at Vergina. Apparently some royal Macedonian won a victory at Argos c. 425, and Macedonian kings became increasingly interested in the great games (Andronicos 1984, 164–6).

Possibly an Olympic and Pythian chariot race victor himself (Moretti 1957, no. 349, 408 BCE), King Archelaos I (413–399) fostered Hellenic culture in Macedon, inviting in artists and poets, including Euripides. He established a nine-day theatrical Olympic festival at Dion (at the foot of Mount Olympus) to Zeus and the Muses, which possibly included athletics (Diod. Sic. 17.16.3–4; Arr. *Anab.* 1.11.1). Macedon was not oblivious to mainstream Greek culture and sport, and Philip II was not the first to use a Hellenizing policy.

Masterfully Machiavellian, King Philip II (359–336) used sport and sanctuaries to legitimize his extension of power over Greece. He won equestrian victories at Olympia (*keles* 356, four-horse chariot in 352 and 348, plus a *synoris* win, possibly at Delphi; Moretti 1957, nos. 434, 439, 445). His son Alexander III “the Great” supposedly criticized him for competing and for publicizing his wins on new coin issues of gold staters and silver tetradrachms (see [Figure 12.1c](#)). Philip did not ride or drive the horses himself and he probably was not even at the games, but he knew the value of indirect victory for interstate public relations. Reminiscent of fifth-century Sicilian tyrants, such as Gelon and Anaxilas, who publicized their Olympic equestrian wins with coins and odes, Philip used Olympic equestrian competition as a display of wealth, power, and Greekness. The practice was politically advantageous for the legitimacy of new or aspiring tyrants and kings, in effect “from the provinces,” in Classical and Hellenistic times.



Figure 12.1 Coins. (a) Tetradrachm from Sicily commemorating Olympic mule cart race win of Anaxilas of Rhegium, 480 BCE; (b) Stater from Aspendos with belt wrestlers, c. 420–400 BCE; (c) Tetradrachm from Macedon celebrating Olympic win of Philip II in the horse race, 356 BCE; (d) Pergamum medallion with prize table, coin purses, and wreath reading “Olympia,” c. 253–260 CE. Courtesy of Anthony Milavic.

Philip tactfully showed deference to Olympia by quickly redressing a Macedonian infraction of the Olympic truce. When Macedonian troops seized and robbed Phyrnon of Athens when he was en route to Olympia during the truce in 348 BCE, Philip restored his goods, added more from his own resources, and apologized that his soldiers were not aware that the truce had been proclaimed (Dem. *De falsa legatione*, *Hypoth.* 335; Aeschin. 2.12).

Turning to Delphi, Philip perhaps followed the earlier example of the Thessalian tyrant Jason of Pherae. Jason seems to have wanted to control Delphi, to stage its games in 370 with a sacrifice of 1000 cattle (10 times the normal number) along with other animals, and to launch a Panhellenic invasion of Persia, but he was assassinated (Xen. *Hell.* 6.4.29–30). In 346 Philip intervened in the Phokian or Third Sacred War to defeat Phokis and

restore Delphi to the Delphians. He became the official protector of Delphi and gained a seat on the Delphic Council. In 346 he presided over the Pythia and later his delegates (e.g., Daochos of Pharsalos) presided (Dem. *Phil.* 3.32). Philip conveniently was chosen to lead Delphi's forces in the Fourth Sacred War. Like Kleisthenes of Sikyon earlier, his military protection of Delphi made him a patron-administrator as well as a Panhellenic victor. Also, continuing Archelaos' policy, Philip imported Greek intellectuals to his court, notably Aristotle as a tutor for young Alexander.

After his Panhellenic posturing established his claim to legitimate and even elite Greek status, Philip proceeded to conquer Greece and create the League of Corinth; he claimed he was protecting the city-states, and he distracted them with the prospect of a Panhellenic invasion of Persia. Philip's successors continued to arrange meetings of the League during peacetime at whichever crown games were held that year (*IG IV*² 1.68.70–73 of 302 BCE). At Olympia the circular Philippeion (c. 337–335), begun by Philip after Chaeronea and probably completed by Alexander, was Philip's monumental family shrine, with statues of Alexander, Philip, Olympias, and other ancestors (Paus. 5.20.9–10). Philip thus established an invented cult of heroized Macedonian kings, one strategically located within the Altis itself near both the Prytaneion and the Pelopeion.³

Philip, as chariot victor, king, and hero, had won Greece as his prize. Undoubtedly he would have continued to commemorate and perpetuate the Macedonian hegemony by politicizing and exploiting Panhellenic sport; but his murder in 336 left it to Alexander to arrange Philip's burial, complete the Philippeion, and invade Persia. Debate continues about the spectacular royal tombs discovered at Vergina, but the monumentality and splendor of the burials are beyond question. The tumulus, the evidence of royal banqueting, and the abundant weapons and gold grave goods evoke Mycenaean and Homeric models as well as the wealth of the Macedonian royal court. Heroic paintings of battles and hunts arguably include depictions of Philip and Alexander, but aside from the tripod from Argos, there is little at the site that relates to athletics. Nevertheless, Philip showed Alexander the value of respecting the cultural traditions of the people you wish to rule. Most Hellenistic kings were wise enough to accommodate the customs and expectations of their subjects in terms of sport and spectacle.

Alexander The Great: Conquests and Spectacular Games

Building upon Philip's achievements, Alexander's megalomaniacal drive to conquer on a colossal scale brought the Greek and Persian worlds together and began the Hellenistic Age. With battles, new cities, and court histories, Alexander ensured his place in history, but propaganda, sycophancy,

anecdotal tales, and hero worship obscure the real Alexander. Our major accounts of his life and campaigns, in Plutarch, Arrian, and Curtius Rufus, were written several centuries after his death in the context of a stable Roman Empire. These authors had access to now-lost or fragmentary documents, but Alexander's legend had grown over time. Even Pompey the Great and Julius Caesar were in awe of his accomplishments and heroic aura. Alexander's meteoric career and premature death spawned historical speculation about the man and his ultimate intentions. Any reconstruction of Alexander's role in the history of sport and spectacle should be cautious about what he supposedly said or thought (Brown 1977; Adams 2014, 333–4). We should focus on what we reasonably know Alexander did—or did not do.

Alexander on athletics

Undoubtedly a physical specimen of great strength and stamina, and a fine horseman and fearless warrior, Alexander probably could have been a great athlete but he perhaps lacked the time or desire. While insatiably aggressive in warfare, he supposedly rejected the Greek passion for athletics. His tutor Aristotle criticized excessive athletic training (e.g., *Pol.* 5.4), which inspired an assumption that Alexander disdained athletics, but his alleged criticisms have a long literary pedigree.

The main source for Alexander's supposedly antipathy to athletics is Plutarch, who says the young Alexander scorned Philip's pride in his Olympic victories (*Alex.* 4.5; cf. *Mor.* 179d; see Adams 2007, 126–7). Alexander was “swift of foot” (*podokes*, Achilles' epithet), but supposedly when his companions asked him if he would compete in the footrace at Olympia, he replied: “if kings were my contestants.”⁴ Reminiscent of Alcibiades' purported remarks about lowly athletes (see [Chapter 10](#)), Plutarch (*De Alex. fort.* 9 = *Mor.* 331b) has Alexander explain that a win would just be a victory over common men but that a loss would be the defeat of a king. Presenting Alexander as antagonistic to “the whole race of athletes (*athleton genos*)” (cf. Euripides' *Autolykos* in [Chapter 8](#)), Plutarch (*Alex.* 4.6) says Alexander held many dramatic, poetic, and musical contests, and also contests in various forms of hunting and stick- or staff-fighting, but he was not inclined to offer prizes for boxing or the *pankration*. A priest at Delphi under Trajan and Hadrian, Plutarch lived at a time when star athletes were thoroughly professionalized (by any definition), and he combines Greek and Roman criticisms of excessive athletic training and wage labor. Plutarch has characters reflect the aristocratic Roman bias that virtuous men should be patrons and producers who appreciate skilled artisans (e.g., musicians, *Per.* 1.5), but they should not display themselves as occupational performers of music, dance, or sport.

Plutarch also places Alexander in a line of prominent critics of the value of specialized athletic training for warfare (see Poliakoff 1987, 99–103). Plato, for example, rejected contemporary athletic training for the soldiers of his

ideal state (*Resp.* 3.403–404b), claiming that athletes pursued diet and exercise “for the sake of strength alone” (*Resp.* 3.410b). Epaminondas of Thebes (420–362 BCE) encouraged his troops to wrestle and exercise with weapons, but he discouraged the use of *palaistrai* by fellow citizens at home (Nepos, *Epam.* 5.4; Plut. *Mor.* 192c and d; 788a). Plutarch (*De Alex. fort.* 2.2 = *Mor.* 334d) says Alexander, knowing when to be a spectator and when to lead, trained himself to excel in warfare, to be, in Aeschylus’ terms, a wrestler in armor (*hoplitopalas*).

When Alexander saw statues of Olympic and Pythian victors in Miletus (Plut. *Mor.* 180a), he supposedly asked where those athletes were when the city fell to Persia (in 494). Although Aratos of Sikyon, general of the Achaean League in 245, was an Olympic pentathlon and chariot victor (Plut. *Arat.* 3.1–2), Plutarch (*Phil.* 3.2–4) has the later Achaean general Philopoemen (c. 253–182 BCE) echo Alexander: although he had a good body and talent as a wrestler, Philopoemen would not compete because it would undermine his future as a soldier, and he mocked and banned athletics from his army as harmful to the physical preparedness of soldiers.

Plutarch’s anti-athletic anecdotes may owe something to Alexander’s self-image as a new Achilles, the swift-footed runner but noncompetitor in his games for Patroklos. With his Homeric name, and always traveling with his pocket *Iliad* (Plut. *Alex.* 8.2), Alexander’s fixation, his model for self-representation, was not his father Philip but the hero Achilles, from whom he claimed descent. Alexander’s boyhood tutor even called him “Achilles” and called himself “Phoenix” (Plut. *Alex.* 5.5). Emulating Achilles, Alexander presented the invasion of Persia as a retributive Panhellenic crusade. After crossing the Hellespont (the strait between Greece and Turkey), he went to Troy and anointed Achilles’ gravestone with oil and then ran a footrace by it, naked with his companions, to honor Achilles (Plut. *Alex.* 15.4). Later, in the Near East, Alexander encountered a royal aversion to personal participation in nonmilitary (or, analogously, nonhunting) sports, an aversion established well before any Greeks criticized athletics.

Alexander supposedly disliked athletics, but he showed respect for athletes and athletic traditions. When he put down the revolt at Thebes and razed the city in 335, the only house he spared was that of Pindar. After the Battle of Issus in 333, Alexander spared Dionysiodoros, a Theban and an envoy to King Darius, because he was an Olympic victor (Arr. *Anab.* 2.15.2). He also made the wrestler Chairon, twice victorious at Isthmia and four times at Olympia, tyrant of Pellene (Paus. 7.27.7). After Gaugamela, Alexander sent spoils to Kroton to honor the famous athlete Phayllos for his participation in the Battle of Salamis (Plut. *Alex.* 34.2).

Alexander also allowed his generals to bring their interest in gymnasium practices and contests to the east with them. Perdikkas and Krateras brought wagonloads of *palaistra* dust and goatskins to cover an impromptu running

track when they camped (Ath. 12.539c). Aristonikos of Karystos, an accomplished ball player (*sphairistes*) to whom Athens had granted citizenship, accompanied Alexander (Ath. 1.19a), and Plutarch (*Alex.* 39.3; 73.3) mentions that Alexander undressed and played ball games for recreation.⁵ The Cretan Philonides, Alexander's courier, ran c. 250 km from Sikyon to Elis in one day (Plin. *HN* 7.20.84), and he dedicated a statue at Olympia (Paus. 6.1.6.5). Macedon clearly had no official policy against athletics, for the Macedonian Kliton won the Olympic sprint, the first known Olympic victory by a non-noble Macedonian, in 328 (Moretti 1957, no. 463) while Alexander was in the east. Other Macedonian victors followed.

Whatever his true feelings about sport, and however self-absorbed and ungrateful to Philip, Alexander continued Philip's politicization of the Panhellenic games and sanctuaries. In addition to completing the Philippeion, Alexander had his decree ordering the return of political exiles read at Olympia, as well as a decree ordering divine honors for himself (Diod. Sic. 18.8.3–5; Curt. 10.2.4–8). Architectural elaborations at Olympia and other Greek sites correspond in time with the reigns of Philip and Alexander, and sport was a crucial part of the elite urban Greek culture that Alexander's conquests spread. He and his successors consciously used athletic contests and celebrations as political devices.

An eclectic policy on games

Excluding drinking contests, hunting, and ball games, Alexander never competed in formal athletic or equestrian contests, but during his campaigns, he organized several sets of games, both formal and informal, often in eclectic combinations, from musical contests to torch races (Arrian mentions 15 athletic competitions; see Adams 2007, 129–38). He used performances as cultural diplomacy, often inviting local dignitaries to his festivals (with games and banquets). Rather than setting up and endowing enduring festivals, Alexander held *ad hoc* games as victory celebrations, as recreations or paramilitary exercises for his army, as part of festivals to local versions of gods, or as funeral games. For example, at Soli in Cilicia in 333, he organized a sacrifice to Asklepios with a military parade, a torch race, and athletic and musical games (Arr. 2.5.8), and he held games to Herakles-Melkart at Tyre in 332 with a military parade, a naval review, athletic contests, and a torch race (2.24.6, with more games at Tyre in 331, 3.6.1). He held Greek athletic and musical games for Apis at Memphis in Egypt in 332 (Arr. 3.1.3–4; again in 331, 3.5.1). He held more games at Susa in 331 with athletic contests and torch races (3.16.9), and there were games in Hyrcania in 330 (3.25.1) and on the River Tanais in 329 (4.4.1–2). Alexander even turned his troops' scaling of the Rock of Sogdiana in 328 into an informal contest by offering large cash prizes for the first twelve soldiers to climb to the top; 30 of the 300 climbers died in the attempt (Arr. 4.18–19). During the Indian campaign (326–325), he

staged games three times with athletic and cavalry contests (Arr. 5.3.6, 5.20.1, 5.29.2). He also arranged musical and athletic contests at Carmania in gratitude for his conquest of India and his survival of the Gedrosian desert (Arr. 8.28.3).

While holding a festival with musical and athletic events at Ecbatana in Babylon in 324 (7.14.1–2), Alexander was watching boys' races when he learned that his friend Hephaistion was near death. Like Achilles, Alexander honored his friend with spectacular funeral games, with 3000 competitors in athletic and musical contests. Upon his return to Babylon, he also held fleet exercises on the river with races and prizes (Arr. 7.23.5). Finally, the competitors from Hephaistion's games soon participated in grand funeral games for Alexander himself at Ekbatana in 323 (7.14.10), and funeral games for Alexander also took place at Alexandria (Diod. Sic. 18.28.4).

The musical and theatrical performers in Alexander's games were professional entertainers, but his troops competed in the paramilitary events. Probably his gymnasium-trained Greeks and Macedonian soldiers also participated, as Xenophon's men had, in the athletic competitions. The contests may have included specialized or "professional" athletes from Alexander's entourage, but a famous incident (below) suggests that these elite champions performed at court in Near Eastern fashion. Alexander valued accomplished performers, but one Olympian victor disastrously fell out of his favor.

Medism, symposia, and performances at court

During his conquests, local subjects hailed Alexander as Pharaoh of Egypt and King of Persia. While offensive to many of his companions, his acceptance of the costume, rituals, and pomp and ceremony of Near Eastern kingship had implications for his policy on sport and spectacle. As his self-infatuation grew, Alexander perhaps found support for his avoidance of personal athletic competition in older pharaonic or eastern models of royal behavior, which held that kings had no rivals or equals and never failed. Kings might publicly demonstrate their talents in archery or charioteering, but they avoided open, free athletic competition lest there be any chance of embarrassment. They had to sustain an image of invincibility before their followers and troops. Instead of competing, they acted as hosts of banquets and producers of performances at court.

Numerous references to banquets and drinking suggest that, by Macedonian and family traditions, and probably by personal inclination, Alexander was a "party animal." He reportedly hosted a famous impromptu drinking contest, in addition to musical, equestrian, and athletic contests, after the cremation of the Indian mystic Kalanos, offering a crown worth a talent (a great sum) as the first prize. The winner drank four pitchers of unmixed wine, and he and many

participants supposedly later died from a chill caused by their indulgence (Plut. *Alex.* 70.1; Ael. *VH* 2.41; Ath. 10.437a).

In India in 325, Alexander held another large banquet and invited local envoys. Koragos a notable but drunken Macedonian warrior challenged to combat the Athenian pankratiast, Dioxippos, victor at Olympia in 336, who accepted. After his athletic career, Dioxippos apparently joined Alexander's entourage as a professional performer or guest celebrity (recall Poulydamas in [Chapter 10](#)). In versions of the story from the Roman era (Diod. Sic. 17.100–101; Ael. *VH* 10.22; cf. Curt. 9.7.16–18), Alexander set a day for the combat, and thousands assembled to watch. Koragos appeared costumed like Ares with armor and weapons; Dioxippos arrived, like Herakles, naked and oiled with only a club, but fit and eager to fight. With obvious overtones of ethnic rivalry, most spectators preferred the Macedonian to the Athenian, but the non-Macedonian Greeks favored Dioxippos. The excited Macedonians were soon disappointed. According to Diodorus, the athlete avoided the soldier's weapons, threw him, and stood with his foot on Koragos' neck. With his club raised, he looked to the crowd of excited spectators, who were amazed by his skill. Alexander motioned for Koragos' release. (Aelian's version has Dioxippos kill Koragos with a knife.) Sources agree that Alexander was upset by the public defeat of his Macedonian soldier by a Greek athlete, and Dioxippos was in disfavor at court. Later some Macedonians framed Dioxippos for theft. Innocent but distraught, he foolishly committed suicide, leading Diodorus to repeat the critical motif that athletes are strong of body but weak of mind.⁶

With its costumes and tragic ending, the story of Dioxippos grew over time, perhaps borrowing from tales of Poulydamas but with Alexander in the role of the frustrated Persian king. The story took on gladiatorial imagery, including the appeal to the crowd, but it also recalls Egyptian wrestling matches before the pharaohs in which Egyptian competitors defeated ethnic rivals. The combat was meant to be an entertaining, reassuring performance at court. Koragos was supposed to win to affirm Macedonian superiority and impress the local envoys, but the production failed, Alexander was upset, and Dioxippos ended up dead. In literature and practice, the discourse between Greek sport and Persian (and ultimately Roman) spectacle was ongoing.

Alexander the imperial hunter

On the frieze above the entrance to the "Tomb of Philip" at Vergina, a fourth-century wall painting depicts hunting scenes set in a sacred grove or hunting precinct. Three horsemen and six men on foot hunt and dispatch two deer, a boar, a lion, and a bear. Several hunting dogs and a figure on foot handling a net also are included. The mature horseman about to spear the lion is probably Philip. The youthful spearman on horseback with a wreath on his head, prominently situated at the center of the painting, probably is Alexander, and

the other figures are assistants in the royal hunt. Such scenes in Macedonian art show the significance of hunting as a traditional Macedonian demonstration of manly excellence, and they also reflect the appropriation of Near Eastern royal hunting imagery. The qualification to join adult symposia in Macedon was the killing of a wild boar without the use of a net, and hunting was a royal pastime (Andronikos 1984, 106–19, figs. 58–71; Carney 2002). Since Philip’s time, noble Macedonian youths attended and guarded the king; they helped him mount his horse “in the Persian fashion,” and they were his hunting companions (Arr. *Anab.* 4.13.1; Curt. 8.6.2–6).

Hunting was one of Alexander’s favorite recreations, and he hunted foxes or birds when he had time on marches (Plut. *Alex.* 23.2–3). Plutarch (*Alex.* 40.3–4) claims Alexander exposed himself to danger while hunting to inspire his men, for example, by spearing a large lion. The son of the companion Krateros dedicated famous bronze sculptures of the scene at Delphi: the Krateros Monument, by Lysippos and Leochares, included the lion, hounds, Alexander, and Krateros coming to help.⁷ In 327 in Bactria, a boar charged Alexander during a hunt and the page Hermolaus stepped in and killed the boar (Arr. *Anab.* 4.13; Curt. 8.6.7). Furious, Alexander whipped Hermolaus in front of the other boys and took away his horse, moving the pages to plot revenge. Keeping elephant hunters in his retinue, Alexander also hunted elephants in India (Arr. *Anab.* 4.30). Such hunting exploits suited Alexander’s role as both a Macedonian and a Near Eastern king, and later Hellenistic rulers sustained the imagery.

Alexander perhaps also adapted aspects of beast spectacles. Pliny (*HN* 8.61.149–50) says that the king of Albania pleased Alexander with the gift of large hunting dog. Alexander had bears, boars, and then deer released, but the hound did not chase them; an angry Alexander had it killed. The king sent another hound, instructing Alexander to test it not on small beasts but on a lion or elephant. Alexander arranged a combat with a lion and watched the dog destroy it. When he had an elephant brought in, he was delighted by the “spectacle” as the dog ferociously and cleverly attacked the elephant until it collapsed.⁸ In another story, a domesticated ass kicked to death a magnificent lion belonging to Alexander’s menagerie (Plut. *Alex.* 73.3). Pliny (*HN* 8.21.54) even claims that Alexander ordered that Lysimachos be shut up in a cage with a lion, but he was able to strangle the beast. Apparently Alexander kept animals for hunting, and he liked to watch combats with beasts.

More Achillean than Aristotelian, Persian as well as Macedonian, a ruler rather than an athlete, Alexander’s favorite, full-time sport was military conquest. An undefeated champion, he could not contemplate retirement, and his death appropriately was followed by lavish, Homeric-style funeral games. Significantly, the succeeding kings of Hellenistic empires continued his eclectic, cosmopolitan policy of supporting both Greek athletics and Near Eastern traditions of spectacle. In time, Roman emperors proceeded down a

similar path.

Hellenistic Sport and Spectacle

The Hellenistic Age was a time of complex and shifting political arrangements as great kings and empires competed and warred against each other. Some still autonomous city-states remained, but most cities were municipalities of varying statuses—from semi-independent to fully subject—within empires. Most had a significant level of local self-government (e.g., with local magistrates), which looked after local matters and civic services; but the empires in which they were located demanded tribute and loyalty. Grand rulers and local communities communicated and exchanged courtesies to assure reciprocal respect, and festivals, athletics, and spectacles were significant in these negotiations. Cities resisted excessive interference but also paid due deference and solicited benefactions and honors from powerful Hellenistic monarchs. As was the case later under Rome, local cities competed against each other for status and recognition, maintaining strong local orientations even in an age of empires. Like local coinages, civic agonistic festivals and honors for athletic victors were expressions of enduring civic identity and pride. Some cities expanded old festivals, and some new cities founded new games to local gods, heroes, or rulers, increasing athletic participation from nontraditional regions.⁹

Hellenistic festivals showed great variety, generally offering elaborate and eclectic programs of events with more categories for prizes. For example, second-century BCE inscriptions attest an expanded Panathenaic program in Athens with nine athletic events for men, five for youths, and six for boys. The Hellenistic Panathenaia also included even more elaborate equestrian competitions, such as the race in armor for warhorses and the parade chariot race. Popular enthusiasm for the Panathenaia remained strong, and the festival continued until the early fifth century CE (Edwards 1957; Tracy and Habicht 1991).

Some cities modeled their games on the Panhellenic crown games and sought the prestige of “iso-” (like or equal to) titles associating them with those cultural icons.¹⁰ For example, in 278 BCE the Aetolian League established the Soteria festival and declared its musical contests “isopythian” and its gymnastic and hippic contests “isonemean” in terms of age classes and prizes. The League sent out embassies asking states to recognize these games officially (*SIG*³ 402, of 246). Similarly, in 182 the Delphic Council recognized the Nikephoria Games of King Eumenes II of Pergamon as “isopythian” in musical contests and as “isolympic” in gymnastic and equestrian events, age categories, and prizes (*SIG*³ 630). Just as “Hellenistic” meant Greek-like, not “Hellenic” or fully Greek, the proliferating “iso-” games had similarities in form but they were not really equal in prestige and pedigree to

the older circuit of Panhellenic games.

Games in other festivals gained the title “stephanitic” or “sacred-crown.” In the late third century BCE, envoys of Magnesia on the Maeander sought recognition for the games to Artemis Leukophryene as “sacred-crown” games (*I. Magn.* nos. 16–87). Also, individual patrons offered one-time contests or established recurring games funded by an endowment. A second-century inscription (*IG* 12.7.515) from Aigiale on the island of Amorgos records that Kritolaos endowed an annual two-day festival to honor his dead son. The dead son was always credited with winning the *pankration*, and victors in the various athletic and torch events received a meat meal from the sacrifices made in his honor.

The Hellenistic institutionalization of athletics brought increased bureaucracy and record keeping. The term *periodonikes* appears in inscriptions in the second century and refers to an athlete who had won at all the four crown or circuit games. The desire to outdo former as well as contemporary athletes, to achieve “firsts,” and to claim notoriety flourished with more games, more prizes, more age categories, and finer distinctions by placements, time, and frequency of wins (Brunet 2010; Pleket 2014a, 107–8). Famous victors included Leonidas of Rhodes (Moretti 1957, nos. 618–20, 622–4, 626–8, and 633–5), winner in all three footraces as well as the hoplite race in three successive Olympiads (164–152 BCE).

Gymnasia and ephebic training

Hellenistic Greeks continued the later fourth-century trend to the elaboration of sport facilities into complexes. Cities and sanctuaries acquired or expanded gymnasia and stadia, often assisted by royal patronage. Formerly suburban retreats, gymnasia began appearing within cities, consistent with their centrality in civic life. As their functions expanded beyond exercise and athletic training, Hellenistic gymnasia became elite social centers, schools for citizenship, and places of cultural legitimacy. Reinforcing their status above non-Greek locals, Hellenistic Greeks distinguished themselves as members of the “gymnasium class.”

The *ephebeia*, the civic system of training youths at gymnasia, involved various procedures, regulations, and officials (e.g., gymnasiarch, *kosmetes*, *agonothetes*). Successful youths achieved status reinforcement (and some continued competing in games), and dutiful and generous officials could go on to civic careers. An inscribed third-century prize list (*SIG*³ 958) from the Koressia on Chios records how an elected gymnasiarch organized a torch race for the young men and other events in the gymnasium; he also provided training three times each month in throwing the javelin, using a bow, and using a catapult. Prizes for the young men were weapons, and boy victors in archery and javelin throwing got a share of the sacrificial meat.

While some intellectual, educational, and social activities might be associated with Hellenistic gymnasiums, systematic physical, and military—and deportment—training of ephebes (*epheboi*) to prepare them for citizenship and for possible military service clearly was most important in the minds of civic leaders.¹¹ Although under civic supervision to an increasing degree, gymnasiums still were public and open (with some restrictions about hours and ages) for exercising for fitness or for preparing for local civic athletic contests. If, in the process of their physical education and ephebic contests, some youths showed impressive athletic potential, they might consider competing at distant major games.

Valuable information on the operation of a local gymnasium and its emphasis upon athletic and military training of the youth comes from a two-sided inscribed stele from Beroia in Macedonia of c. 180 BCE,¹² which concerns the civic sponsorship of training, the administration of the gymnasium, and regulations for proper conduct.

On Side A of the stele, a preamble states that it is appropriate that the rules for the gymnasium be publicly displayed so that they will be obeyed by the young men, and so that the gymnasiarch, who will enforce the rules and oversee the training routines and good order (*eukosmia*) of the boys (*paides*), youths (*neaniskoi*), and *epheboi* (military cadets) who used the gymnasium, will be accountable for their actions. The elected gymnasiarch, of between 30 and 60 years old, is to swear an oath of office and have three assistants.

Side B bears rules concerning the three age classes and also adults and visitors. Regulations concerning boys include restrictions about when men can disrobe, with a system of raised or lowered signals, apparently out of concern about improper advances or sexual abuse of the boys.¹³ The youths are instructed not to bother the boys. Ephebes are to train daily in spear throwing and archery, and boys are to train as instructed.¹⁴ Trainers (*paidotribai*) are to examine the boys three times a year and award an olive wreath for the victor.

Notable are restrictions about access to the gymnasium: slaves, freedmen, and their sons, *apalaistroi* (“men without a *palaistra*”), male prostitutes, market traders, drunks, the mentally ill, and shopkeepers (*agoraiai*) were not allowed. Clearly citizenship and legitimate status were essential, for the gymnasiarch was liable to a heavy fine for allowing infractions (B. 26–34).

The gymnasiarch also oversaw an annual festival and sacrifices to Hermes, organized the hoplite race and contests in physique and conditioning for those under 30 years old, and arranged a torch race for boys and youths, including selecting torch leaders who will supply oil for the racers, and selecting the judges and winners. The gymnasiarch also was responsible for decorum during the festival; he had authority to fine and flog disruptive individuals, illegal entrants in the contests, and anyone who took a bribe for a victory.

The last part of the decree shows that order in the gymnasium was enforced

by corporal punishment (flogging) and fines for boys and young men, and also by fines for officials and adult offenders. The gymnasiarch also could find anyone who insulted or attacked him (B. 39–45). The gymnasiarch is to keep records of all fines, which one could appeal, and he is held responsible for the fines for two years after his term of office.¹⁵

Such complex regulations reflect the importance of the gymnasium, its students, and its officials to the city, as well as concerns about military preparedness and social order, class restrictions, and propriety during training and festivals.

Attested from 335 but probably existing in some form earlier, the Athenian *ephebeia* had been a compulsory public system of physical and military cadet training for young men of 18–20 years old (Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 42). At Athens and elsewhere, the educational, gymnastic, and paramilitary training became voluntary and elitist. The *ephebeia* in Athens became a finishing school and attracted youths from outside. Second-century victor lists (*IG* II² 956–66) show that the program of the Hellenistic Theseia showcased the games of the ephebes. Organized by *agonothetai*, with most events limited to Athenian citizens but some events (or divisions) open to outsiders, the festival included several contests (e.g., torch races, horse races, javelin throwing, *euandria*, *euhoplia*, *hoplomachia*, regular athletic events, a full equestrian program) as part of the ephebes' paramilitary training for entering citizenship.¹⁶ Comparable to Sparta's *agoge*, the *ephebeia* and Theseia were expanded, with an elaborated set of military games, even after Athens' military prominence had waned. The public parades and performances by the finest youths were civic rituals and spectacles, but they also had military and athletic dimensions, at least on a local level.

Athletic professionalism

Increasing and explicit evidence in Hellenistic and Roman times shows that more people were making athletics their vocation. Civically sponsored training and festival games for citizen ephebes in local gymnasia provided a foundation or what H. W. Pleket calls “a bridge” between gymnasium sport and the public contests, further competition, and a possible career in athletics (Pleket 1975, 73–4, 2014a, 102). This was the normal route for members from reasonably well off families. In addition, Hellenistic cities and monarchs began sponsoring promising young athletes who lacked adequate financial resources for high-level competition at prestigious games.

Inscriptions of c. 300 BCE from Ephesos provide the earliest certain evidence of subsidization of promising athletes. Discussing an inscription concerning an athlete named Athenodoros (*I. Eph.* 1415) and a parallel but more fragmentary inscription (*I. Eph.* 1416) from the same stone concerning an athlete named Timonax, S. Brunet (2003, esp. 227–9; Robert 1967) suggests

that Ephesos had a civic athletic supervisor (*epistates*) in charge of training boys in the local gymnasium, which afforded non-wealthy boys the chance to train and show promise. Athenodoros had won at local festivals and at Nemea, where he declared himself an Ephesian; he then was granted full citizenship by Ephesos and was entitled to the cash reward for such a victory by a citizen. After the Nemean win, the athlete's trainer asked the Ephesian town council to recognize (with grants of citizenship) certain individuals who contributed funds to allow Athenodoros to pay for his further training and his travel to compete, since the athlete lacked enough resources for those costs (*I. Eph.* 2005). The Ephesians agreed because the athlete had brought glory to the city and had good prospects of more illustrious wins. In the similar case, Timonax had won at Isthmia and Nemea as a boy, and his father proposed that Ephesos subsidize him for future competition. Ephesos had shown eagerness for victories earlier in the fourth century, when the city bribed the Olympic victor Sotades, a runner from Crete, to declare himself as representing Ephesos at the games of 380 BCE (Paus. 6.18.6). Less than a century later, then, Ephesos adopted other practices to acquire local victors. Subsidization was a calculated civic investment in future athletic glory.

These inscriptions show that athletes, with access to generic group training in a public gymnasium, might gain subsidization if they won a significant victory on their own, supported by family resources and profits from local wins. These athletes, then, likely came from middle and not lower class families who could provide a certain level of economic support. State subsidization for the necessary and expensive training and travel allowed further competition at a high level. Continued victories were not guaranteed, but the family and state collaborated in hopes of mutually beneficial success.

Ptolemaic Egypt: hybrid spectacles

After Alexander's death various Hellenistic kings used games to compete with each other for legitimacy and fame. King Ptolemy I Soter (305–282) and Queen Berenike I of Egypt, harking back to Philip rather than Alexander, both won chariot victories at Olympia, setting a precedent for the Ptolemaic dynasty.¹⁷ Eager for flattering ties with old Greece, Ptolemy II Philadelphos (285–246) reinforced the dynasty through cultural gestures and benefactions, including the Museum and Library at Alexandria, the Gymnasium of Ptolemy in Athens, and possibly the *palaistra* and gymnasium at Olympia (below). He further entrenched Ptolemaic rule along Hellenistic and Egyptian lines with games and spectacles. Establishing a cult in honor of his parents, he founded the quadrennial isolympic Ptolemaia festival in 282 (or 279) with athletic, equestrian, and musical events (*Syll.*³ 390).

As noted (in [Chapter 11](#)) numerous female as well as male members of the royal court won equestrian victories in the third century BCE at Olympia and elsewhere. Ptolemy II set up chariot victory statues for himself and his wife

Arsinoë at Olympia c. 270 as part of the cult of the royal household. His courtesan Belistiche of Macedon won Olympic equestrian victories, as did Berenike II, wife of Ptolemy III Euergetes. The recent discovery of several victory epigrams for more third-century Ptolemaic male and female equestrian victories (see [Chapter 11](#)) shows there was a consistent policy of seeking such notoriety.

Second-century Panathenaic victory lists with numerous Ptolemaic kings or associates (e.g., Ptolemy VI and his consort Cleopatra II) between 182 and 158 BCE reflect diplomatic ties between Egypt and Athens. Like the Ptolemies, the Attalid dynasty of Pergamum established a local festival, the Attaleia, and won equestrian contests at Olympia and Athens (Tracy and Habicht 1991, 217–21; Shear 2007). Such activities dramatically confirm the aspirations and self-representation of Hellenistic rulers on the edges of the Greek world.

In the winter of 275/4 Ptolemy II staged a grand procession that became famous in antiquity. Recalling grand Athenian and Persian celebrations, the lengthy procession through the stadium in Alexandria included a great number and variety of animals, from leopards to camels, as well as a statue of Alexander in a chariot drawn by elephants, evoking both Alexander's return from India and the triumph of Dionysos in the East (Ath.197c–203b). The procession included wondrous stagecraft, distributions of gifts, technical marvels (a colossus rising up on a float), and other performances, and it possibly inspired more elaborate triumphs at Rome (Coleman 1996; Bell 2004, 114–38).

Also from the reign of Ptolemy II comes an assessment of an investment in a young athlete in training. In a papyrus letter of c. 257 BCE (*PZenon* 59060), a schoolteacher in Alexandria writes to a certain Zenon concerning Zenon's ward Pyrrhos. Zenon had given instructions to train the boy as an athlete if he showed promise, but otherwise not to waste money. The boy's trainer (*gymnastes*) feels the boy has potential to win a victory, and so his training will continue. As at Ephesos, private resources financed the boy's early training, but at some point the question of continued support arose. Perhaps further support and early victories could lead to substantial subsidization from a town council or from the Ptolemies themselves.

As well as fostering games, patronizing Olympia, and competing (indirectly) in equestrian events, the Ptolemies extended the Near Eastern royal tradition of subsidization of performers and athletes. Apparently they systematically prepared athletes and sent them abroad to compete. Alexandrian athletes continued to find success at Olympia and elsewhere (Decker 1991; Remijsen 2010). Subsidization may have been a factor in the career of Sosibios of Alexandria, who later was a leading political player at the court of Ptolemy IV. He won the boys' *diaulos* in a festival at Alexandria in the first half of the third century, and went on to win the youths' wrestling at the Panathenaia,

and chariot races at Isthmia and Nemea. Ultimately, despite some incidents with Jews in Alexandria (see [Chapter 13](#)), the Ptolemies' policy of combining Greco-Egyptian religious and agonistic elements assisted their regime and the stability of Egypt.

Hellenistic Olympia

In Late Classical and Hellenistic times, the Olympics adapted to Macedonian dominance, a wider world, and institutionalized professionalism. Macedon's politicization and patronage of Olympia set a precedent for other Hellenistic monarchs and benefactors, so Olympia continued to acquire more elaborate facilities, renovations, and political monuments. Probably a benefaction by Ptolemy II in the third century BCE, the *palaistra* northwest of the Altis, a double-colonnaded structure (c. 66 m²) around an open court, was used specifically for practicing combat events. On its sides were various rooms with bath basins, a bathing pool, sitting areas, and change and storage areas. The large gymnasium (c. 220 by 120 m) nearby was another benefaction, also perhaps by Ptolemy II though often dated to the second century. A monumental entrance (*propylon*) was added later in the second century, but the elaborate gymnasium was not really needed or heavily used. It was largely meant for show (Wacker 1997).

The Hellenistic Olympic program expanded slightly, probably to flatter the equestrian interest of kings and queens, with foal races and foal chariot events. A boys' *pankration* was introduced in 200, and the first winner was Phaidimos from Egypt (Moretti 1957, no. 603). Over time Olympia also had to open up its criteria for entrance, perhaps to any athlete able to speak Greek. The origins of participants at the crown games changed, and traditionalists may have disliked the arrival of strange or semi-Greeks. Polybius (27.9.3–13) describes a match between the great Olympic boxer Kleitomachos of Thebes and Aristonikos of Egypt in 216 BCE. When the enthusiastic crowd cheered for Aristonikos as the underdog, Kleitomachos reproached them for supporting an Egyptian prepared and sent by King Ptolemy IV (c. 244–205) rather than someone fighting for the fame of Greece. The story suggests ethnic bias and resentment as former outsiders were gaining membership in the Greek country club. (On later infractions by Egyptian athletes, see [Chapter 15](#)). Participation remained primarily Greek but it became more ecumenical with more competitors from Asia Minor, Egypt, and North Africa.

The Hellenistic Legacy

Philip, the Hellenizer, used sport to help infiltrate and conquer Greece, and Alexander, the Medizer, used cultural assimilation while trying to conquer the known world. Father and son, and their successors, appreciated the political value of both winning and fostering games, and of using athletic festivals and

sites as political forums. Whatever his personal preferences, Alexander consciously sponsored a variety of occasional contests, established cities with sports facilities, and appropriated the Near Eastern symbolism of kingship and spectacles.

Alexander's conquests exponentially expanded the playing field for Greek sport. Even when his empire fragmented upon his death, the new, smaller kingdoms sustained the mixture of Greek and Near Eastern features, a combination of civic festivals and royal spectacles. Hellenistic cities were pockets of Hellenism: Greek athletic complexes, local contests, and ephebic physical education were signs of the ethnicity and status of the gymnasium class. Gymnasia and athletic festivals celebrated the life of the urban elite, providing opportunities for offices (e.g., gymnasiarchies) and status display. Games both attracted outside competitors and offered chances for local athletes to begin careers. Like the earlier Greek colonies, and like Rome's later provincial centers, these new cities on the fringes of the Greek world were new sports franchises eager for legitimacy through athletic fame. In the countryside, however, native traditions persisted, and effective rulers understood their subjects' devotion to local sporting and religious customs.

As Ptolemaic Egypt shows, Hellenistic kings staged spectacles that validated their dynasties to different mass constituencies on a regional scale that dwarfed the former *polis* model. Their royal spectacles were displays of power that included processions, royal feats, hunts, combats at court, and even spectacular punishments involving beasts. They reinforced their rule in locally traditional ways with processions and rituals, and they also sought Panhellenic prestige as patrons and victors (and subsidizers of victory) at Olympia, Athens, and elsewhere. Even royal wives and courtesans became equestrian victors. Hellenistic leaders wisely learned and supported the sporting and spectacular interests of their citizens and subjects.

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Notes

- 1 See Bergmann (1999); von Hesberg (1999); and Kuttner (1999) in Bergmann and Kondoleon, eds. (1999).
- 2 Roos (1985); and Adams (2003, 205–6), both doubt the story. Cf. Kertész (2005).
- 3 Borza (1993, 249–51, 280–1, feels the structure reflects a new idea of monarchy combining European and Asian aspects. Schultz (2009) suggests imagery of divinity as well as royalty.
- 4 Note the inversion here: supposedly Greeks earlier challenged the legitimacy of Alexander I at the Olympics, but later Alexander III rejected the idea of competing at Olympia.
- 5 O’Sullivan (2010) suggests that Spartan and Macedonian enthusiasm for ball games perhaps popularized such games in post-Classical Greece and Rome.
- 6 While proceeding into Athens as an Olympic victor, Dioxippos stared at a woman who had come to enjoy the “spectacle,” and Diogenes supposedly remarked that a girl had overcome the great strongman (Ael. *VH* 12.58;

Plut. *Mor.* 521b). The motif recalls Milo; see Chapter 10.

- 7 Barringer (2001, 201–2, explains that the inscription on the monument referring to Alexander as the one who “hunts the bull-devouring lion” was a metaphor for Alexander’s conquest of the Persian king.
- 8 Cf. Herodotus’ story (3.32.2) that Cambyses let his wife and sister watch the combat he arranged between a puppy and a lion cub. Cambyses was pleased to see the puppy’s brother join in and help him defeat the cub.
- 9 On Hellenistic games, victors, and commemorations of victories, see van Bremen (2007); Pleket (2010) and Pleket (2014a, 102–5). On Hellenistic (and Roman) games in Asia Minor, see Pleket (2014b).
- 10 For a list, see Parker (2004). The proliferation of games in the Hellenistic and Roman eras, many in imitation of or aspiring to be ranked with the crown games of the traditional “circuit,” led to increasing complexity in terminology. Pleket (2004; 2010, 148–61; 2014) and Remijsen (2011) challenge any simple categorization by prizes, but Slater (2012) argues that the distinction between games that offered only crowns on site and others that awarded material prizes, which came to include bags of coins, continued in postclassical times.
- 11 Kah and Scholz, eds. (2004); Gauthier (2010); Chankowski (2010); Pleket (2014, 99–102). On gymnasia in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt, see Remijsen (2014, 355–60).
- 12 *SEG* 27.261; Miller (2012, no. 185); Gauthier and Hatzopoulos (1993); Lupu (2005, 249–68); Potter (2012, 127–36).
- 13 Aeschines (*In Tim.* 9–12, Miller 2012, no. 183, of 345 BCE) reflects similar concerns about hours, boys and youths, games to Hermes, and the gymnasiarch’s responsibilities at Athens.
- 14 A third-century BCE inscription from Teos shows that youths were to be trained in infantry drill, archery, and javelin; *SIG*³ 578; Miller (2012) no. 184.
- 15 Side B. 97–9 concerns the sale of *gloios* (the combination of sweat and olive oil that athletes scraped off their bodies), which was thought to have medicinal properties and was sold as an ointment; Miller (2012, 218 and no. 8); Potter (2012, 135–6).
- 16 Bugh (1990); Kennell (1999). On the Roman era, see Newby (2005, 168–201).
- 17 See Remijsen’s (2014) overview of Greek sport in Hellenistic Egypt.

The Roman Republic: Festivals, Celebrations, and Games

And nothing is so damaging to good morals as to hang around at some spectacle. There, through pleasure, vices sneak in more easily.

Seneca, *Letters* 7.2, trans. A. Mahoney

Even after Olympics, Superbowls, and World Cups, we remain fascinated with the extent, diversity, and brutality of Roman spectacles.¹ From early Christian condemnations to lurid martyrologies (stories of the Roman abuse of martyrs), we have inherited a characterization of Roman entertainments as decadent, vulgar, sadistic, and dehumanizing. Romantic novels and sensationalistic nineteenth-century paintings on arena themes (e.g., J.-L. Gérôme's 1872 "Pollice Verso") have burdened the popular perception with misleading and disturbing images of the Roman arena. The film industry has exploited the brutal image of Roman games in epic sword and sandal movies replete with sexuality and violence. What *Ben Hur* and *Quo Vadis* put in the popular mind, *Spartacus* and *Gladiator* have reinforced.

In the traditional dichotomy of ancient entertainments, the Greeks were youthful, intellectual, democratic, altruistic, participatory athletes, but the Romans only cared to play games of war, conquest, and oppression. Drunk with power and devoid of pity, sadistic Romans preferred to be spectators at bloodbaths. Crazy emperors staged ever more extravagant spectacles to manipulate the vulgar, politically impotent mob, who were flushed with blood lust as gladiators fought "to the death," animals were slaughtered for fun, and innocent Christians were eaten by lions. Yes, the Romans had chariot races, as the Greeks did, but they organized them as professional mass entertainment to distract the masses from their own misery. Supposedly the Romans, by some aberrant birthright, simply could not appreciate the inspiring beauty of Greek athletic contests, so they corrupted them.

Although the Romans managed a huge and stable empire for centuries, although their engineers constructed concrete and brick architectural wonders, although they had their Homer in Vergil, their Demosthenes in Cicero, their Thucydides in Tacitus, and their brilliant jurists and Stoic philosophers, their achievements draw less popular interest than their arena spectacles. It has been too easy to be titillated and disgusted by Roman spectacles, to marvel that an empire so impressive and civilized in art, architecture, and law could be so debased and inhumane in its entertainments.

Sport historians no longer begin with the premise of some unique, unfathomable Roman pathology or perversity. Roman spectacles cannot be understood historically when judged by modern humanitarian sentiments.² Empires always have spectacles, and sport history is not a morality play.

Rome offers much to sport historians by virtue of its abundant sources and the eclectic, cosmopolitan nature of its sports and spectacles. Over time Roman sport assimilated aspects of Etruscan, Italian, Greek, and Near Eastern traditions. Influenced by recurrent warfare, acquiring an immense empire and enormous resources in wealth, humans, and animals, and making advances in technology, transportation, and architecture, Rome put its own cultural stamp on its games and entertainments. That stamp, indeed, was spectatory. Roman spectacles (*spectacula*) were public shows, grand in scale and abounding with action, things arranged to be seen and worth seeing, put on by elite representatives of the community for religious or political reasons, and also to reinforce social order and their own status.

Native and imported, competitive and violent, spectacles of the stage, circus, and arena, as well as processions and pageants, became increasingly lavish, popular, and politically charged as the Roman Republic (509–30 BCE) grew in size and power. Before Rome, however, the high civilizations in the Italian peninsula were the Greek colonies in the south, with their Hellenic traditions, and the Etruscans to the north, to whom we now turn.

Etruscan Sport and Spectacle: Ethnicity, Greek Gifts, Roman Roots?

Etruscan entertainments demonstrate a diversity of sport and spectacle combining outside influences (by trade or migration) and native cultural tendencies. They present challenges of interpretation: were their artistic images of activities cultural borrowings or were such activities actually practiced in Etruria, and by whom?

Despite Herodotus' story (1.94) that the first Etruscans immigrated to Italy from Lydia in Asia Minor,³ debates about the origins of Etruscan civilization now tend to favor the Etruscans as native Iron Age Italian peoples (Villanovans) who developed rapidly by contact with Phoenicians, Greeks, and other trading peoples. The Etruscans certainly knew aspects of Greek culture, including art, epic, and myth, but the Etruscans' interest in astrology and augury (the reading of signs and omens), their elaborate concept of the afterlife, and their use of chamber tombs suggest Near Eastern influences. They developed a distinctively cosmopolitan, urban culture, which spread as they expanded to the north and south in Italy during the height of their civilization in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE. Their expansion included an Etruscan monarchy at Rome, which profoundly affected the religion, architecture, and other aspects of the emerging city. Sport historians continue

to discuss the interrelationships of Etruscan, Greek, and Latin influences on Roman sports and spectacles, especially those of the circus and arena.⁴

An expert on Etruscan games, J.-P. Thuillier acknowledges the Etruscans' exposure to Greek sport through art (e.g., the François Vase from Chiusi with scenes of Patroklos' funeral games, and numerous finds of Panathenaic prize amphoras in Etruria); but, noting that Etruscans did not compete at the Panhellenic Games, he argues that the Etruscans had their own sporting culture, one that did not simply replicate Greek sport.⁵ Were Etruscans truly “playing the Greek” or were they just working from Greek artifacts?⁶ Certainly they did not accept all of Greek athletics without reservation or adaptation.

The Etruscans left no literary accounts of sports or funeral games, but archaeological evidence, from tombs to terracottas, from vases to works in bronze, provides abundant if often ambiguous testimony for their entertainments. Before their power declined, the affluent and refined Etruscans enjoyed banqueting, music, dancing, fishing, and swimming for recreation, and they also enjoyed watching skilled performers. Iconographic evidence suggests that the Etruscans were interested in sports, especially boxing and wrestling from the late seventh century on, and horseracing from the early sixth century on (Bevagna 2014, 397). Well-known tomb paintings of c. 525–450, notably those at Chiusi and Tarquinia (e.g., the Tombs of the Augurs, the Olympiads, and the Chariots), show scenes of boxing, wrestling, javelin throwing, jumping, and chariot racing, all set outdoors without permanent facilities. The Tomb of the Monkey at Chiusi also includes a painting of horseracing and a wrestling scene with a judge or trainer. In vase and tomb paintings with gymnastic scenes, as in the Tomb of the Monkey (*Scimmia*) at Chiusi (c. 470) or the Tomb of the Chariots at Tarquinia (c. 490), men with boxing thongs take a stance with the left hand open as a guard (a technique shown in Greek art; Miller 2004, 51–2). An Etruscan amphora from Vulci depicts boxers using this technique accompanied by flutists. Other athletes practice events from the Greek pentathlon (i.e., jumping, holding discuses, using javelins with thongs), indicating some familiarity with Greek athletics.⁷

In Etruscan art athletes sometimes are nude, but sometimes they wear shorts or some form of belt, loincloth, or jockstrap. Thuillier suggests that examples of full athletic nudity may be due to Greek idealizing artistic convention, while other Etruscan artists painted the normal practice in Etruria. A limited series of Greek black-figure “perizoma” vases (c. 510), with white jockstraps painted over the pelvises of originally nude athletes, probably were export products specially adapted for Etruscan markets with reservations about full nudity (Thuillier 1988; McDonnell 1993).

It is uncertain whether the Etruscans had athletic festivals, but they shared a common religious festival at a sanctuary at Voltumna with some sort of performances, apparently put on largely by slaves (Livy 5.1.3–7 on 403 BCE).

Herodotus (1.167) says that after the Etruscans of Caere stoned naval prisoners of war from the Greek state of Phokis in 537 the Delphic oracle told them to honor the dead with athletic and equestrian contests. This, however, was an exceptional event and not a native Etruscan festival. In the Tomb of the Augurs at Tarquinia (c. 530) a painting depicts nude wrestlers in a characteristic opening stance over stacked metal cauldrons, surely meant as prizes (see [Figure 13.1](#)). Beside the wrestlers is an authoritative priestly figure with a curved staff (*lituus*) who probably conducts the events. This scene is near a painting of a tomb door (and images of “Phersu,” see below), and it is likely that wealthy Etruscans staged—but did not compete in—extravagant funeral games.



Figure 13.1 Etruscan fresco of wrestlers in the Tomb of the Augurs, Tarquinia, Italy, c. 520 BCE.

© The Art Archive/Alamy.

Unlike the Greeks, elite Etruscans did not participate in athletic contests or equestrian racing. Scenes from the Tomb of the Chariots at Tarquinia show well-dressed Etruscans watching games while sitting comfortably on elevated viewing stands, complete with an awning. Foreign or slave performers, specialists but of low social status, are depicted with limited or no clothing. Some compete against each other before the spectators; others wait under the stands, and some seem to be erotically occupied. Females of status, who were prominent in Etruscan society, are shown sitting with males as spectators at games, and some spectators seem to be socializing and conversing rather than

focusing intently on the performances. In the Tomb of the Monkey a single female spectator seated on a chair, with a footstool and parasol, may represent the sponsor of games or the widow of the deceased for whom the depicted (athletic and equestrian) games and dancing took place.

Funerary markers (*cippi*) from Chiusi depict athletes, a three-horse (*trigae*) chariot race, and also a raised stand upon which judges or officials sit. Under the stand are vases, perhaps containing oil or wine, which may be prizes. Tomb paintings (e.g., the Tombs of the Olympiads and of the Chariots) show two-horse chariots (*bigae* in Latin), and reliefs from Chiusi also depict two- and three-horse chariot races. Four-horse chariot races, so popular in later Rome, are not depicted. Unlike Greek drivers, Etruscan and Roman charioteers wore protective caps or helmets, wrapped the reins around their bodies, and carried knives to cut themselves free in crashes. The Etruscans also had horse-dismounting races, which turn up later at Rome, as well as the “Game of Troy” (*Lusus Troia*), an equestrian performance admired by Augustus (Suet. *Aug.* 43.2; Verg. *Aen.* 5.545–603).

The Etruscans clearly had a rich tradition of games and spectacles, with parallels to Archaic Greece but with locally distinctive features. Artistic depictions, if based solely on imported artifacts, do not prove actual practice of Greek athletics. Despite some disturbing scenes of brutality, death demons, and executions in Etruscan art, we should not blame them for gladiatorial combats at Rome (see below on Phersu). The Etruscan monarchy influenced aspects of Roman chariot racing at Rome, but Greece also knew the dangers and popularity of that spectacle. Etruscan influence on early Roman military parades (triumphs, see below) is likely, but that long predated the association of triumphs with beast spectacles. Overall, the Etruscans’ greatest sporting impact was that they instilled or reinforced the Roman inclination to be comfortable, well-entertained spectators who personally avoided physical public competition, especially involving nudity.

Roman Festivals and Entertainments

Early Rome celebrated festivals or holidays (*feriae*) concerned with fertility, harvest, and purification. Convinced, like Greeks, that they were dependent on the good will of the gods, Romans regularly offered public blood sacrifices of domesticated animals for the welfare of the community. The official festival calendar also included rustic ceremonies (e.g., Saturnalia, Lupercalia) held close to temples and shrines. Rome’s games (*ludi*), primarily chariot races or theatrical performances, arose as acts of communal thanksgiving to the gods for military success or deliverance from crises. Inherently popular, they increased over time and became annual and state-financed, and civic officials organized them as supplements to traditional *feriae*. Early games included chariot races (*ludi circenses*), which tradition associated with the Etruscan

King Tarquin the Elder (616–579 BCE). Tarquin supposedly laid or planned out the Circus Maximus, marking special areas for upper class Romans to raise wooden stands 12 feet high, and he brought in horses and boxers, mostly from Etruria, to provide entertainment (Livy 1.35.7–9; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 4.44.1). The games were institutionalized as annual “Roman” or “Great Games” in 366 BCE. With Etruscan and Latin roots, Roman games from the start were spectacles with some sort of facilities for viewers. Spectatorship was assumed in legends: the rape of the Sabines under Romulus took place as people assembled to watch games in the Circus (Livy 1.9.6–10; Plut. *Rom.* 14.4).

A pestilence drove the Romans to introduce the first theatrical or scenic (*ludi scaenici*) entertainments in 363 BCE; the first entertainers were Etruscans who danced to pipe music but did not sing or mime. As Livy notes (7.2), the entertainment was imported, but it became customary, and young Romans imitated it. Early shows took place on temporary stages before permanent theaters developed in the Late Republic (133–31 BCE). Other votive games, such as the *Ludi Magni Votivi*, originated as triumphal games vowed to Jupiter by generals before campaigns, but they became institutionalized and state-supported. Unlike the regular festival games organized by the state, or triumphal games after military successes, under the Republic the notorious blood sports (*munera*) with gladiators were organized privately by relatives to enhance the funerals of nobles.

Chariot Racing at Rome

Horse races took place in very early festivals in the Campus Martius, but the greatest Roman spectacles were chariot races in the Circus Maximus. Debate continues on the relative significance of Etruscan, Greek, and Latin influences. While Tacitus (*Ann.* 14.21.2; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 7.73.1–3) says Rome adopted equestrian contests (*equorum certamina*) from Greek Thurii, Etruscan influence, supported by traditions about King Tarquin, is apparent in the costumes and techniques of Roman chariot racing. Greek influence on the Circus is indicated by early similarities to the Greek hippodrome with its starting gates; but other features (e.g., factions, central barrier, seven laps, position of the finish line), although not well known until the Late Republic, seem distinctively Roman.⁸ Livy (10.47.3) notes that in 292 BCE Rome began awarding palm branches to victors in the races according to a custom borrowed from the Greeks, so it seems that early Roman chariot racing combined Greek competitive aspects with an Etruscan emphasis on spectatorship.

Historically, Tarquin’s contribution to the Circus Maximus probably was to alter the course of a stream underground, drain the area, introduce spectator stands, and hold regular races on the site. The facility continued to develop

architecturally during the Republic, with the first starting stalls (*carceres*) perhaps added in 329 (Livy 8.20.2). The Circus was primarily a venue for chariot races, but it also housed numerous other spectacles including beast and gladiatorial shows and triumphal games. Due to related problems (e.g., of animal control), many non-equestrian events later shifted to amphitheatres when they developed.

Factions: Firms, teams, and fans

Individuals may have made the earliest circus entries, as in Greece, but a system of professional chariot racing associations called factions (see [Chapter 15](#)) arose at Rome, perhaps after the Second Punic War (218–202 BCE).⁹ Their origins are uncertain, but the factions responded to the need for more efficiency and professionalism in the staging of races as the state provided regular funding. The factions were privately owned and operated businesses led by private executives (*domini factionum*) (see Cameron 1976). Well entrenched and self-contained by the first century, with stables and headquarters in the Campus Martius, the factions owned all the chariots, horses, stables, and equipment needed for races. Mosaics and inscriptions show that these extensive organizations recruited (or purchased) and trained an array of functionaries from drivers to wheelwrights. Some (*sparsores*) threw water on the horses, and others (*hortatores*) called out strategies or encouragement from horseback or on foot. Although two-horse chariots are known, teams usually consisted of four, six, eight, or twelve four-horse chariots (*quadrigae*). Teams identified themselves by the colors worn by charioteers (and loyal fans): red, white, green, and blue, with the greens and blues later dominating under the Empire.

The term faction also applies to groups of circus spectators who favored a certain color. The composition and historical role of these groups are much debated, especially for the Late Empire (see [Chapter 16](#)). Some see them as political parties, social class divisions, militias, or religious affiliations, but, the leading expert, A. Cameron, sees them simply as “fan clubs” or groups of “circus partisans.” Cameron properly recognizes spectator sport as a major activity in itself, one capable of moving people and affecting history. As businesses and as color-coded teams and groups of fans the factions endured for many centuries. Early emperors embellished the physical setting of the races, but the factions remained independent until the third century CE.

Triumphs: Spectacles of Military Victory

In modern times armies returning from winning wars often received ticker tape parades, and thousands of civilians turned out to applaud the success of their soldiers and leaders. Early Rome felt the same impulse to recognize

publicly the contributions of armies and generals to the security and prosperity of the state. The Republic was a warrior state with armies of soldier citizens led by elected officials (consuls); and military and political power were intertwined in the concept of *imperium*, the power to command troops given to leaders by the Roman people. Semi-legendary figures in the works of the historian Livy (e.g., Horatius, Cincinnatus, Camillus) offered models of heroism, sacrifice, and victory in defense of Rome, and the expansion of wars put ever more emphasis on the leadership of illustrious generals. Rome formalized the recognition of a successful general by awarding him a triumph (*triumphus*), a public processional entrance into Rome in celebration of his significant military victory. Livy (30.15.12) calls a triumph the highest honor that a Roman could achieve, and many consuls and later emperors celebrated them. In all, Rome witnessed some 300 triumphs—a military track record of conquest and splendor (Brilliant 1999; Beard 2007; Östenberg 2009).

The origins of triumphs remain uncertain. Processions are one of the most fundamental rituals of early communities, and scholars suggest the influence of Italian, Greek or, most likely Etruscan precursors (Versnel 1970, 396–7; Beard 2007, 289–95, 305–18). There were earlier versions of the word in Greek and Etruscan, Etruscan art depicts similar processions, and the Latin peoples seem to have had similar traditions. Rome’s triumphs are interpreted as Etruscan New Year’s celebrations with the king in the role of a god, or as festivals of victory, new beginnings, or good fortune; but by the time the practice emerged in Roman history it already combined religious, military, and political elements. The purposes clearly included commemoration of the general’s great victory, display of the courageous forces, the plunder they had won, and the lands they had conquered, and a gesture of gratitude to Jupiter.

Triumphs and lavish funerals happened only occasionally and were not part of the regular festival calendar. Both were spectacular social ceremonies for which the elite arranged processions and rituals; both involved sacrality, familial honor, orchestrated display, interaction among participants and spectators, and provisions of generosity. In both the public played crucial roles as witnesses and beneficiaries (Bodel 1999). Rather than an obligatory honoring of the dead, however, the triumph was a communal celebration of victory and life, of success and security. Funerals were privately organized and financed events—unless officially declared a state funeral (*funus publicum*), but triumphs were official “affairs of state” for which the Senate granted permission and provided funds for the arrangements.

The elements of triumphs and their sequence in the procession changed over time as individual generals added their own adaptations, but sources (e.g., Livy, Polybius, Plutarch, Zonaras) suggest the outlines of the event under the Republic. The victorious general, the *triumphator*, dressed in elaborate robes that suggested kingship and Jupiter, rode in a special gilded chariot, designed to look like a round tower, that was drawn by four horses. In front of the

general marched his attendants carrying the symbols (*fascēs*) denoting his *imperium*. The general's sons or family members might accompany him, in the chariot or riding its horses, but all others proceeded on foot. In the chariot a public slave held a laurel wreath (or gold crown) over the great man's head and regularly reminded him that he was a mortal, that his glory was temporary. The general was to avoid haughtiness and to remember that his success was assisted by Jupiter's favor. There is a parallel to the Greek athletic victor's triumphal entry into his city-state in a chariot to the acclaim of citizens grateful for the honor he brought them, and Greek values also demanded that the victor recognize the superiority and assistance of the gods (see [Chapter 10](#)).

Roman triumphs included the display of prominent captives, some of whom would be executed later. Cicero (*Verr.* 2.5.77) says that triumphing generals kept enemy leaders alive for the procession to let the Roman people enjoy the spectacle (*spectaculum*). It was a great distinction for the army to capture the enemy leader, and it was reassuring to the masses to witness foes such as Jugurtha and Vercingetorix—with Cleopatra making herself an exception—being killed in triumphs. Some prisoners of war in the procession were freed as an act of generosity and were presented as new freedmen of the general. Along with the captives other impressive and valuable spoils of war (or depictions of them), including material objects and animals, were displayed.

The general's army, which he normally would have disbanded outside the city, joined the parade on this special occasion. Many of the soldiers wore special decorations, weapons, or crowns personally given to them by the general to recognize their valor. Reinforcing the slave's remarks about mortality, soldiers chided the general with disrespectful chants to temper self-adulation or to appease the gods. This carnivalesque element of license, in stark contrast to the absolute obedience demanded of soldiers on campaign, is typical of festivals of thanksgiving, including the Saturnalia. Consistent with the theme of religious thanksgiving, the procession included cattle and priests to conduct a sacrifice.

Hallowed by tradition, the route of the triumph afforded maximum visibility for the people. After assembling in the Campus Martius, the parade entered the city through a special triumphal gate, which was closed thereafter and was not to be used by others. The procession wound its way through areas of Rome, circling the Palatine Hill, before taking the Sacred Way through the Forum to the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, where the general dedicated his *fascēs* (a bundle of rods and an ax), wreathed with laurel leaves, to Jupiter for bestowing his favor on him. While most shows were held in one facility, the capacity of which limited the number of spectators, triumphs (and funeral processions) moved and reached unlimited numbers of viewers.

Triumphs could evoke mixed feelings. They normally incited popular jubilation, as crowds filled temporary stands and lined the streets to view the

sight and to applaud and cheer—to interact and be involved in the collective ritual. The magistrates and senators, however, who marched in front of the general in the triumph, perhaps had politically ambivalent feelings. Cicero (*Pis.* 60), who never had a triumph, later denigrated the event as mere vanity and pageantry. It was the only time a general was allowed to bring his army into the city, and the potential danger increased as the Republic weakened. A triumph appropriately acknowledged the conquering general for serving Rome well, but it also dramatically heralded the power of a single man—in effect hailing him as a king and even a god. As triumphs grew in number and extravagance, the balance between popular gratitude and elite self-representation was threatened.

Since triumphs so flattered generals, Rome was careful about granting them (Beard 2007, 187–218). To be eligible a general, one who held an office with *imperium* and had taken his own auguries, must have victoriously conducted a legitimate war in his assigned territory against a foreign foe. Also, he must have secured peace, winning and completing the war with a minimum of 5000 enemies killed. Triumphs thus functioned as visible proof of such deaths. The process began on campaign at the front. The troops proclaimed their general *imperator* if they felt he was worthy of a triumph. The general sent a messenger bearing news of his victory to Rome, and upon returning with his army he remained outside Rome and awaited the will of the Senate. The Senate determined whether or not to proceed with a popular vote in the assembly, which could permit the general to enter the city with his army while retaining his *imperium*. The Senate traditionally had the power (by procedures and by control of the necessary funding; Polyb. 6.15.8) to celebrate a general's success lavishly or to disparage his achievement. Since triumphs so clearly associated military prowess and political leadership, the Senate worried about undermining Republican traditions and its own status.

Given these requirements, the awarding or securing of a triumph was heavily politicized. The regulations, which apparently grew over time, were not consistently upheld. The Senate might choose to grant only a lesser form of triumph, an *ovatio* or procession on foot, as was done for Crassus' defeat of the revolt of Spartacus. If not granted a triumph in Rome, a general might finance and stage one himself outside the city, and some generals coerced the Senate into granting them triumphs whether they met the formal requirements or not. Pompey, for example, held two triumphs without holding the requisite offices, and Julius Caesar triumphed for victory in what was a civil and not a foreign war.¹⁰

Triumphal grandeur and games

Since the Republic was often at war, the number, scale, and accoutrements of triumphs became more elaborate and expensive. By the early second century processions included paintings depicting events from the war, banners,

musicians, and torchbearers. Generals promised votive entertainments to gods and staged lavish triumphal displays of plunder, exotic beasts, and captives. Rome's numerous wars with Greeks, especially the Macedonian wars, brought greater exposure to Greek art and Hellenistic culture. After defeating Macedon at Cynoscephalae in 197 BCE Flamininus celebrated the first three-day triumph, in which he displayed thousands of pounds of gold and silver, as well as prisoners and hostages (Livy 34.52). In his triumph in 186 after defeating the Aetolian Confederacy in Greece, Fulvius Nobilior, a patron of Greek culture criticized by the more xenophobic Cato, introduced performances by Greek athletes and actors, and also the first beast show. Livy (39.22.1–2) says he gave ten days of magnificent games, including many actors brought from Greece, the first contest of athletes provided “as a spectacle,” and also a hunt with numerous lions and panthers, much like the shows of the later Republic. The variety of events (*ludus*, *athletarum certamen*, *spectaculum*, *venatio*) suggests that Roman leaders were experimenting with different entertainments in different combinations. For example, Greek athletics (probably with a pentathlon, not just wrestling, boxing and running, which were already known at Rome, and probably not fully nude—see page 262 later) were introduced as a novel supplement, not as an independent show. Perhaps the beast fights were added at the end to ensure a crowd-pleasing finale.

Aemilius Paullus celebrated his victory over King Perseus of Macedon at Pydna in 168 with a grand triumph that lasted three days and included a vast amount of gold and silver (Plut. *Aem.* 32–5; Livy 45.40). Perseus' young children marched with him along with the war captives. Sadly, because generals sought triumphs for political prestige and popularity, they sometimes provoked attacks and sought out engagements, as in the pacification of Spain, to accumulate the requisite “body count.” As Rome's frontiers and subject territories became more distant, the triumphs brought foreign enemies to Rome to be displayed to citizens who were increasingly removed from actual battles. The *triumphator* in effect recreated for citizens the spectacle of his achievements on campaign (Polyb. 6.15.8).

Hunts and Beasts: Conquests and Games

As Rome expanded abroad, exotic animals were paraded, put on display, and killed in hunts (*venationes*) in triumphs and shows.¹¹ Moderns wonder why Romans enjoyed the abuse of beasts as a public spectacle, and scholars debate the essential nature of the shows as performances, sacrifices, or hunts. The phenomenon is to be understood historically in terms of Rome's growth from humble roots to imperial power. While distinctive in scale, geographical scope, logistics, and institutionalization, the beast shows were not a perverse Roman invention. New in neither principle nor iconography, they were not without precedent or purpose (see Shelton 2007).

First, we should recognize our ideological baggage or urban illusions about animals, and not impose our sensitivities upon the Romans. In these days of animal rights, of the SPCA and PETA, Rome's beast spectacles seem alien and inhumane, but anachronistic moral indignation is unenlightening. In fact, modern humanitarian sentiments seem hypocritical against a long history of brutality to beasts and insensitivity to the harm we have done to nature.¹² As we play with our pets, attend a circus or rodeo, reduce natural habitats, go hunting, or eat a steak, perhaps we should ask ourselves: "Were the Romans so unique?" or "Why does taxidermy persist?"

As we saw, beast-hunting spectacles date from at least the Bronze Age. Merchants had traversed the Mediterranean for many centuries, selling art with cultic or royal images of beasts; and in the process they discussed religion, sport, and spectacles with foreigners. Like Crete, Cyprus, and Thrace for Greece, Sicily and Illyria were stepping-stones for the cultural transmission of tales and traditions about beasts to Italy. Rome's *venationes* were not inventions *ex nihilo* but rather variations or adaptations in a Mediterranean discourse on nature, power, empire, and entertainment. Romans admired wild animals but they mainly saw them as predators or game, as subhuman and soulless threats and nuisances to be controlled or killed, as sources of food, or as trophies symbolizing virtue. Despite some criticism by Stoics, most Romans welcomed the killing of beasts in shows as an exciting entertainment, not senseless cruelty but a reassuring demonstration of Rome's power and territorial dominion.

Early Rome: Animals, hunting, and spectacles

From its beginning Rome regularly killed animals in blood sacrifices, and most of the flesh of the victims was eaten. Early Romans also hunted, baited, or tormented animals from the local countryside in public festivals, perhaps representing the elimination of vermin. In the *Ludi Cereales*, the games of the Italian fertility goddess Ceres, foxes with burning brands tied to their tails were let loose in the Circus Maximus (Ov. *Fast.* 4.681–712). In another annual ritual, dogs were crucified live (Plin. *HN* 29.14.57). From 173 BCE the annual games of Flora, an Italian fertility goddess, included hunts of harmless small roe deer and hares in the Circus (Mart. 8.67.4; see Wiseman 1999). Public sacrifices and the games of Ceres and Flora probably made Romans more receptive to the spectacular carnage in the arena, as did traditions of rustic subsistence hunting.

The modern concept of "field sports," of sport hunting as a gentleman's pastime, has led some scholars to downplay native Roman hunting traditions and to see *venationes* as a foreign and imperial corruption—neither true hunting nor true sport. Modern values aside, hunts in the wilds and in the arena were related in the minds and customs of the Romans.

Some literary passages seem to suggest that Roman nobles learned sport hunting in the countryside from the Hellenistic east in the Macedonian wars of the second century BCE. Polybius (31.29.1–12) claims Scipio Aemilianus was the first Roman noble infatuated with sport hunting along Greek lines, but Polybius probably exaggerated Scipio's fame as a hunter to flatter his hero and his own favorite pastime. When Sallust charged (*Cat.* 4.1) that agriculture and hunting were “tasks fit only for slaves” (*servilibus officiis*), he was condemning a pastime of the political elite he hated—the *nobiles*. Elsewhere (*Iug.* 6.1), Sallust presents Jugurtha's passion for hunting and his courage in killing lions and wild beasts as impressive. These comments on hunting, then, reflect biases for and against Greeks and nobles, not dramatic innovations. Any increase in Greek-style hunting just supplemented a long Italian tradition of hunting, by commoners and nobles, for food and for sport (Anderson 1985, 83–100; Green 1996).

Like the Near East, Rome knew the overlapping development of subsistence hunting, sport hunting, and hunting as a spectacle. The area around early Rome was a rich hinterland for wildlife (e.g., boars, hare, deer), and local traditions of hunting to provide meat and to defend farms from pests continued throughout Roman history. Literature and ritual preserved the idea that Romans captured and ate wild animals. In Virgil, Aeneas hunts with Dido, and Italian boys give up sleep to pursue hunting (*Aen.* 4.129–70, 9.605). Virgil (*G.* 3.404–13) also recommends carefully tending to hounds used to hunt boars, hare, roe deer, and wild asses. Livy (1.4.8–9) claims that Romulus and Remus hunted animals in the woods before Rome was founded. In later art the analogy of rural hunts to urban beast spectacles is undeniable: mosaics intermingle scenes of farming, sport hunting, rural meals, and the capturing of beasts for the arena.

Both Greece and Rome had traditions of hunting, fighting, baiting, or abusing animals as displays of masculinity and status, as rituals, and as a recreation. Myths of Herakles abound with threatening beasts. The Roman goddess Diana paralleled Greek Artemis as a huntress and mistress of beasts. Greeks staged fights between smaller animals and birds as entertainment and as martial inspiration.¹³ The sixth-century reformer Solon supposedly legislated shows of cock- and quail-fighting to stir military courage (*Luc. Anach.* 37). Themistocles perhaps inspired his troops before Marathon by pointing out a cockfight (*Ael. VH* 2.28). As a base from the fifth-century Wall of Themistocles shows (see [Figure 13.2](#)), Athenians passed time in the gymnasium by baiting small animals, and roosters and prey from the hunt were popular courtship gifts. Spartan youths sacrificed puppies and staged combats between boars (see [Chapter 9](#)), and Isokrates (*Antid.* 213 of 353 BCE) mentions annual displays of trained lions and bears in Athens. The Mediterranean tradition of bull sports persisted in Thessaly, whence Caesar introduced them to Rome (below). The Mediterranean world had long used

animals for sport and spectacle, and Rome soon expanded into that wider world.



Figure 13.2 Athenian youths watch a dog and cat (?) fight; base from Wall of Themistocles, c. 510 BCE. Athens, National Archaeological Museum.

Photo: akg-images/Erich Lessing.

Roman expansion: More lands, more beast shows

When Rome fought Tarentum and the mercenary army of Pyrrhus of Epirus in south Italy (281–272), Romans for the first time faced elephants on the battlefield, a byproduct of Alexander’s conquests and awe-inspiring symbols of foreign threats. In 275 the consul M. Curius Dentatus exhibited four elephants taken from Pyrrhus in his triumph (Sen. *De Brev. Vit.* 13.3; Plin. *HN* 8.6.16). Many displays of elephants in processions and the arena would follow. K. Coleman (1996) suggests that the fabulous procession of Ptolemy II Philadelphos (see [Chapter 12](#)) inspired the use of animals in Roman triumphs and spectacles. As she notes, the animals in Ptolemy’s procession symbolized territorial control, but the Ptolemies killed animals only in sacrifices. The same procession perhaps also influenced Roman distributions of largesse to spectators: it included a float decorated as a cave from which pigeons and doves flew out with ribbons tied to their feet to allow spectators to catch them (Ath. 200b–c).

The Early Republic (509–264 BCE) knew rustic subsistence and elite sport hunting, along with blood sacrifices and some traditions of animal abuse in public. By 264, however, Rome was on the brink of expanding overseas, which brought a great increase in the volume and violence of *venationes*. From the Punic to the Macedonian and other wars, Rome’s extension into the Hellenistic, Egyptian, and Near Eastern world exposed Romans to old traditions of the symbolic use of animals in processions, propagandistic staged royal hunts, and imperial iconography. Before long Rome began experimenting with spectacles involving animals and humans.

In the Punic Wars Rome encountered exotic African beasts. Pliny (8.21.55) claims that a certain Carthaginian named Hanno (perhaps the general and

senator) was the first known person to tame a lion and display it. During the First Punic War, Caecilius Metellus brought to Rome some 140 elephants captured from Carthage in Sicily. Experimenting with transporting beasts by sea, he ferried the elephants from Sicily on rafts constructed of wood platforms on rows of amphoras lashed together. He exhibited the beasts as spoils of war in the Circus Maximus in 252, arranging a mock battle with slaves (Plin. *HN* 8.6.16–7; Polyb. 1.84; Sen. *De Brev. Vit.* 14.2; Florus 1.18.26). Pliny remarks that those who say the elephants were not killed cannot explain what became of them. In the late third century Plautus mentions ostriches and *mures Africanos*, possibly leopards or elephants, in processions associated with games in the Circus (*Persa* 189–99, *Poen.* 1011–12).

During the traumatic Second Punic War (218–201), as Hannibal defeated Roman armies and held parts of Italy, Rome encountered the custom of having animals abuse rebels or criminals. In 218 Hannibal made Roman prisoners of war fight duels with one another using Gallic weapons to teach his men the glory of victory or death in battle rather than in captivity (Livy 21.42–3; Polyb. 3.62–3). He also staged a combat between a captive and an elephant (Plin. *HN* 8.7.18). He had agreed to let the captive go free if he killed the beast, but when the Roman did so, to the dismay of the Carthaginians, Hannibal had him killed lest news of the event diminish Romans' fear of elephants.

Wars in the Greek East also stimulated Rome's spectacular use of animals (Rosivach 2006). As noted, in 186 Nobilior arranged the first *venatio* at Rome, with a hunt in which Asian beasts, lions and panthers, were killed. In 179 the Senate ordered that animal shows must not be costlier than Nobilior's extravagant show (Livy 40.44.8–12); but, like the Senate's ban on the importation of *Africanæ* (probably any large feline) around the same time (Plin. *HN* 8.24.64), such sumptuary measures were doomed by the popularity and political advantages of the shows. By 174 the censors themselves arranged for iron animal cages in the Circus (Livy 41.27.6). In 169 two aediles (magistrates in charge of public buildings, markets, and festivals) exhibited 63 African wild beasts (probably leopards), 40 bears, and some elephants in the Circus Maximus (Livy 44.18.8), confirming that beast shows had become part of official circus games. Ambitious aediles now regularly needed animal resources, for, as Livy (44.18.8) said, magnificent displays were on the increase.

Animals were soon put to yet another use in shows. After earlier Roman brutal public punishments of deserters and rebels by scourging and beheading, in 167 Aemilius Paullus first used elephants to trample non-Roman deserters. This recalls the story (3 *Macc.* 4.11, 5.1–6.21) that Ptolemy IV Philopator (244–205 BC) tried to force Jews in Alexandria to worship Dionysos. He had defiant Jews driven into the hippodrome to face elephants drunk on wine and

incense, but instead of trampling the Jews the beasts turned on Ptolemy's troops. By 146 Scipio Aemilianus (son of Aemilius Paullus), as well as crucifying Roman and beheading Latin deserters at Carthage, threw non-Roman deserters and runaway slaves to wild beasts in shows at Rome (Val. Max. 2.7.12–4). These early examples anticipated the exposure of victims to beasts in spectacular executions under the Empire.

Under the Republic, then, Rome adapted the Near Eastern custom of “royal hunts,” of collecting and transporting beasts to be displayed and killed. The hunters (*venatores*) in these shows were foreign professional hunters imported to demonstrate their skills (usually with spears) against exotic animals. These hunts represented imperial power, suppression of threats, provision of security, and protection from uncivilized chaos and social disorder.¹⁴ The collection of the animals was a form of circumambulation ritual—a “beating the bounds” to lay claim to hunting territory, and the exotic animals were paraded like alien prisoners of war. Roman leaders did not go out of town for their royal hunts; they brought the hunts into town. Triumphant generals became beast-masters by bringing back wild beasts for display and destruction in shows at which the leader, prominently placed and in control as producer and host, won his glory but remained appropriately Roman. Moreover, since Romans saw hunting in the wilds as a good preparation for warfare, they felt that exposure to the killing of animals in arena hunts would have similar benefits. However contrived, the *venationes* were an appealing surrogate for the violence of the hunt and the battlefield.

Gladiators: Roman Rites and Combats

Despite Hollywood, we should clarify what a gladiator was and was not. The earliest gladiators may have been slaves or prisoners of war forced to fight to the death at funerals, but by the later second century a *gladiator* (from *gladius*, the Spanish sword used by Roman soldiers), while still a slave or captive, was a skilled, trained, and armored weapons fighter who performed in public combats against another gladiator. Gladiatorial duels involved a good chance of injury and the possibility of death, but they have been misunderstood as fights necessarily “to the death.” D. Potter (2012, 187–96) correctly sees these shows of skill and endurance as “entertainments” put on by trained and talented performers. However distasteful, gladiatorial shows were a Roman spectator sport. Like fighting cocks or pit bulldogs, the gladiators represented their masters and fans, providing vicarious self-validation of Roman militarism and machismo. The combats were war games with weapons—deep and dangerous play indeed, but not pointless slaughter or sacrifice.¹⁵

Rome was a warrior state accustomed to violence and cruelty, and brutal spectacles faced no widespread opposition in Roman society. There was no

modern sense of compassion or humanitarian distress about intentionally harming animals or humans. Stoic and elitist literary sources might criticize the emotionalism of spectators, but they often praised the gladiator's soldierly discipline and acceptance of death through training.¹⁶ Cicero, who invested in gladiators (*Att.* 4.8.2, 4.4a.2), declared (*Tusc.* 2.17.41) that, like Roman soldiers of old, gladiators show discipline and a desire above all to please their masters. Offering an education in how to face pain and death, they sustained wounds, when defeated they offered their necks for the death blow, and they died with honor (*Sen. Dial.* 2.16.2, *Ep.* 30.8; *Cic. Phil.* 3.14.35). Gladiators supposedly provided emotional conditioning for the soldier-citizen; and, as Rome moved from survival to imperial security, fewer Romans were personally involved with military action and hence increasingly fascinated with military virtues (e.g., *gravitas, disciplina*). There is no doubt that gladiators came to mean a great deal to the Romans, but there is doubt and debate about how gladiatorial combat came to Rome.

Origins, exposure, and importation

Older works assumed that Rome adopted gladiators from the Etruscans as a form of funerary human sacrifice turned into a deadly competition. Writers were long willing to blame the “oriental” Etruscans for corrupting the European Romans (Wiedemann 1992, 33). Sixth-century Etruscan tomb paintings do depict a blindfolded man with a club being attacked by a large dog and attended by a masked figure named Phersu with a whip or leash. The role of the beast and the hindrance or abuse of the victim are intriguing, but it is not clear whether this “game of Phersu” was an execution, sacrifice, mythical allusion, or contest. Early Etruscan art offers no certain depictions of gladiators, and at most the Phersu game was a precursor to Roman beast combats.¹⁷ Gladiatorial combats *per se* probably did not come to Rome directly through Etruscan influence, but the Etruscans probably reinforced the Romans' preference for watching foreign, slave, or captive performers.

A. Futrell (1997, 11–19) interprets gladiatorial spectacles as “a sacrificial complex” of empire, in which the re-enactment of suffering and death was a metaphor for the foundation of Roman imperialism. Although gladiatorial combat at Rome began in association with funerals, reading gladiators as sacrificial victims recalls the ancient Christian claim that gladiatorial games began as sacrifices to dead ancestors (*Tert. De spect.* 12). Historically, there is no strong evidence of a regular practice of human sacrifice of gladiators at Rome. Since the rituals of combat and sacrifice differ, the arena can be seen as a place of sacrifice only in an abstract sense.¹⁸

Most scholars now favor an early fourth-century (or earlier) origin of gladiators among the Campanian, Sabellian, or Osco-Samnite peoples of Italy. Campanian tomb paintings (especially from Paestum, c. 370–340 BCE, see [Figure 13.3](#)) and vase paintings seem more obviously to depict armed single

combats—and even referees, and sources refer to combats at Campanian banquets. The fighters' motives or status cannot be determined with certainty, but G. Ville argues that Campanian funeral games included gladiatorial fights in which elite volunteers competed for prizes but originally fought only to the point of first bloodshed.¹⁹ Some sort of early combats probably took place, but they were not yet found at Rome, nor were they culturally Roman.



Figure 13.3 Campanian gladiator fresco of third century BCE.

Photo: Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Paestum, Italy/The Bridgeman Art Library.

The question of the origin of Roman gladiatorial combat, like the origin of Greek athletics, is probably not answerable with certainty in terms of a single original location and context and a simple linear transmission. Before the first recorded gladiatorial fight in 264, Rome had been exposed, directly or indirectly, to all the suggested original influences (e.g., rituals of sacrifice and condemnation, grand funerals, Homeric armed single combat, scapegoats). Early Rome already knew other spectacles of death: animals sacrificed in festivals, public executions of criminals, and countless acts of brutality in war. Since the importation of sports and spectacles involves adaptation or negotiation—some cultural give and take, we should concentrate on the immediate context of Rome's adaptation and development of gladiatorial combats into culturally distinctive Roman spectacles.

Romans encountered Campanian gladiatorial combats in 308 BCE when the Romans and Campanians won a battle against Samnites, who fought with plumed helmets and greaves on their left leg. Livy (9.40.17, Loeb trans. B.O. Foster) says the Romans adorned the Forum with the captured arms: "So the Romans made use of the splendid armor of their enemies to do honor to the

gods; while the Campanians, in consequence of their pride and in hatred of the Samnites, equipped after this fashion the gladiators who furnished them entertainment at their feasts, and bestowed on them the name of Samnites.” The Romans did not immediately adopt Campanian-style gladiatorial entertainments at banquets, and Livy seems to imply that the Romans found that custom inappropriate. Nevertheless, in 308 Romans were exposed to elements of later gladiatorial shows: Samnite gladiatorial armor, staged combats, and the term “Samnite”—like “gladiator” later- as an insult.

The earliest known gladiatorial combat at Rome came over half a century later, when the sons of Decimus Junius Brutus gave a gladiatorial show for their dead father in 264 BCE. This *munus*—a duty, tribute, or obligation to the dead—was a modest affair with only three pairs of gladiators, and it was held in the Forum Boarium (Livy *Epit.* 16; Val. Max. 2.4.7), not in the main Forum where later combats were usually held. This probably was simply a forced combat, possibly to the death; there is no mention of later standard elements (e.g., prizes, a special facility, training, the appeal for a reprieve). Perhaps it was a trial balloon, a novelty in an age when Rome was experimenting with spectacular entertainments and executions. Note that Valerius Maximus (2.4.7) says that Marcus Scaurus added a “contest of athletes” to ceremonies in 264, and recall that the first display of elephants captured in war took place in Rome in 275. In 270 Rome executed some 300 Campanian rebel soldiers in the Roman Forum; they were paraded in, bound to stakes, scourged, and decapitated (Polyb. 1.7.12).

Rome did not adopt gladiatorial combats in 308, but did so by 264. In the interim much had changed. The final conquest of Italy spotlighted military leadership, and politically the “Struggle of the Orders” ended Rome’s old caste system. Plebeians were becoming consuls, they dominated the Tribal Assembly, and by 287 they could make laws; but Rome did not become egalitarian. The elite adjusted politically and reformulated itself as the “nobles” (*nobiles*), a class of descendants of office holders. Like Archaic Greek aristocrats, this elite, no longer able to rely simply on birth, restored the deferential tendencies of the masses by competitive demonstrations of their worthiness for leadership. Military displays in triumphs, beast shows, and *munera* at funerals became essential features of popular politics.

Cannae and the ideology of elevation

A crucial stage in the peculiarly Roman construction of the gladiator took place in the wake of Hannibal’s defeat of Rome at the Battle of Cannae in 216 BCE. When that defeat brought a national crisis of mass despair, religious fervor, and depleted manpower, the Senate declined a Carthaginian offer to ransom freeborn Roman captives from Cannae. Instead, as Livy (22.57.9–12,

Loeb trans. B.O. Foster) relates, Rome proclaimed a new levy of troops and even turned to using slaves.

They ordered that armor and weapons should be made ready, and took down from the temples and porticoes the ancient spoils of enemies. The levy wore a strange appearance, for, owing to the scarcity of free men and the need of the hour, they bought, with money from the treasury, 8,000 young and stalwart slaves and armed them, first asking each if he were willing to serve. They preferred these slaves for soldiers, though they might have redeemed the prisoners of war at less expense.

The slave volunteers swore an oath to serve courageously as long as the enemy was in Italy. Rome preferred slaves, selected for their fighting potential and equipped with the dedicated spoils of earlier wars, to free men who had already surrendered and broken their oaths. Roman tradition stressed a hierarchical social order based on freedom, landownership, and military service, but Cannae forced Rome to appreciate that even slaves—selected and sanctified by a voluntary oath—could serve Rome, like gladiators later, by fighting and inspiring others to military virtue.

Cannae crystallized an ideology of military virtue, of enlistment, endurance, and elevation, which Rome traditionally expected of its soldiers in battle and came to demand of gladiators in the arena. Hannibal's invasion made Romans crave public demonstrations that the state would punish poor fighters and reward good soldiers, of whatever origin. Sources do not record any gladiatorial combats between 264 and 216, but then numbers escalated dramatically: 22 pairs in the Forum in 216, 25 pairs in 200, 60 pairs in 183, and so on. Cannae left a legacy of insecurity, a need for reassurance through brutality, a willingness to see moral examples beyond the ranks, and an approval of the elevation of the lowly by demonstrations of martial virtue (*virtus*) and willingness to face death (*amor mortis*). The arena's military morality plays reenacted the lessons of Cannae: gladiators faced death in the arena like those slave volunteers and like heroes who died in battle.

Early Romans and Greek Sport

Upholding the old contrast between participatory Greek sportsmen and idle Roman spectators, H.A. Harris claimed that the Romans never fully appreciated Greek sport because they were inclined to cruel spectator sports.²⁰ In fact, early Romans were not opposed to exercise and games in themselves, but they felt that most exercises should contribute to military preparedness, and that non-military recreations should not be taken too seriously.

Perhaps from the Etruscans, the early Romans were familiar with basic sporting contests, such as running, wrestling, and boxing, which they probably

practiced clothed. Although they preferred, like Etruscans, to be spectators at the state festivals, they saw the value of informal moderate exercise and recreation. Cato the Elder (Plut. *Cat. Mai.* 20.4) suggests that second-century Romans practiced paramilitary exercises as well as boxing and swimming in the area of the Campus Martius. Later, Horace (*Carm.* 1.8, 3.12) and others also mention physical recreations in the Campus (e.g., running, swimming, discus, javelin, boxing). Romans must have had some familiarity to understand early second-century references in Plautus and Terence. Plautus (*Bacch.* 428–9) mentions running, wrestling, javelin, discus, boxing, ball play, and jumping, and Terence (*Prol. Hec.*) claims a boxing match disrupted his play.

Romans were initially suspicious of Greek sport because of its public nudity and associations with homoeroticism. The Roman cult of masculinity involved a certain conservative prudishness and paranoia about effeminacy. Ennius (239–169 BCE, in Cic. *Tusc.* 4.33.70) said stripping naked in public was the start of immorality (*flagiti principium*), and Cato the Elder said fathers did not bathe with sons because they were ashamed by their nakedness (Plut. *Cat. Mai.* 20.5–6). Dionysius of Halicarnassus (7.73.3–4) claims that athletic events (running, boxing, and wrestling) took place in 499 BCE (217 is a more likely date) in votive games in the Circus after some chariot races, and that the contests were held according to Greek custom, with winners receiving crowns (Crowther 1983; Schulze 2004). Dionysius (7.72.2) also claims that the athletes in those games were not nude, and that competitors at Rome still wore shorts in his day (late first century). Romans apparently were more critical of the attire than the activity of Greek sport, but later they became more tolerant of nude athletics with increased familiarity with nude bathing in public baths, which were equipped with exercise areas (Crowther 1980/1981).

Since the Republic was often at war and its legions repeatedly defeated the storied Greek phalanx, it is understandable that Rome's early physical culture had a pragmatic, military focus, and that Romans distrusted the culture of the Greek gymnasium.²¹ They apparently concluded that the Greeks' priorities were misplaced. Military successes vindicated Roman masculine virtue and ethnic superiority, so why adopt the cultural passion of defeated foes? The military impracticality of Greek athletics was a minor critical theme in Roman literature, but recall that some Greek intellectuals and leaders themselves had questioned the military value of athletics (see [Chapter 8](#)).

Despite suspicions at home, Rome's early cultural diplomacy with Greece included sensitivity to sport. Aware of the Greeks' enthusiasm for their gymnasia and athletic contests, Romans usually showed proper respect when in Greece. Like Macedon, they used gatherings at the great games as press conferences. After a diplomatic overture, and in thanks for their help against Illyrian pirates, in 228 BCE Romans were granted the privilege of participating in the Isthmian Games (Polyb. 2.12.8). In 208 Titus Manlius

came as a Roman envoy to Olympia to ask for the support of the Western Greeks in the Second Punic War. After the Second Macedonian War, Flamininus used the Isthmian Games in 196 to make his famous declaration that Rome was giving freedom to the Greeks formerly subject to King Philip V of Macedon (Livy 33.32–3). Flamininus later became President of the Nemean Games, and he made dedications at Delphi. Even while conquering some Greeks, Rome used the games to communicate with Greek allies and potential allies. Although Mummius sacked Corinth in 146 BCE, he still honored Olympia by dedicating a bronze statue of Zeus and 21 gold shields for the Temple of Zeus (Paus. 5.24.8, 5.10.5).

Actually holding Greek games at home was another matter. A few years after Flamininus' gesture, Nobilior, as noted, included the first athletic contests at Rome in his triumph of 186. He imported Greek athletes who probably demonstrated the events of the Greek pentathlon (not just boxing, wrestling, and running) for the first time at Rome. Although these athletes probably were not fully nude, the experiment did not catch on quickly. Other occasional games followed (Lee 2014, 534–6), but it was a long time before there was a regular Greek athletic festival in Rome itself.

Roman-Hellenistic Spectacular Discourse

As Rome expanded, Hellenistic spectacular entertainments influenced Rome, and Hellenistic kings adapted Roman spectacles. J. Edmondson (1999; cf. Carter 2001) notes that in 167–166 BCE a Roman general and a Hellenistic king, trying to outdo past shows, mixed native and foreign traditions in spectacular entertainments. In 167 Aemilius Paullus toured Greece and Olympia, sacrificing to Zeus and marveling at Pheidias' statue of Zeus (Livy 45.27–8). At Amphipolis, after elaborate preparations, he celebrated his victory in the Third Macedonian War with more than Roman entertainments (Livy 45.32.8–33.6). Appropriating features (e.g., *theoroi*, *agones*) of a major Greek festival, he gathered professional entertainers, athletes, and horses for contests, and he invited delegations for sacrifices and banquets. A large crowd assembled for the spectacle (*ad spectaculum*), for the stage shows, the contests of athletes and horses, and the display of plunder from Macedon. Paullus supposedly declared that a military conqueror could also organize a banquet and games (Livy 45.32.11). He used the cultural language of Greek spectacle to broadcast himself as a conqueror and a benefactor.

The Seleucid King, Antiochos IV Epiphanes intended to outdo the celebrations of both Roman and Hellenistic leaders. Formerly a hostage at Rome, he perhaps had witnessed Roman spectacles, or he may have heard of Scipio Africanus' gladiatorial combats at New Carthage in Spain in 206 BCE in funeral games for his dead father and uncle (Livy 28.21). According to Polybius (30.25.5–26.9; cf. Val. Max. 2.7.13f; Diod. Sic. 31.16.1–3), in 166 in

a festival to Apollo at Daphne, just outside Antioch, Antiochos held massive games that compounded Hellenistic and Roman elements. Consciously competing with Paullus, Antiochos sent embassies throughout Greece to invite visitors. The festival opened with a magnificent procession with thousands of soldiers in different regional styles of equipment (including Roman), 100 six-horse chariots, 40 four-horse chariots, a chariot pulled by four elephants, and 36 elephants, as well as young men, sacrificial animals, images of gods, masses of gold and silver plate, some 200 women sprinkling perfume on the crowd, and hundreds of women on litters. Then came 30 days of athletic and musical contests, some form of gladiatorial combats with some 480 gladiators (imported from Rome or possibly local Greco-Syrians), and possibly beast shows. Antiochos, in fact, had introduced Roman-style gladiatorial combat in Syria earlier in his reign, importing expensive gladiators from Rome. Horrified at first, after repeated exposure local spectators became enthusiastic about the combats, and many local youths gained increased interest in training in arms. Next at Daphne, for five days the king, like a generous gymnasiarch, made scented oils available in the gymnasium and offered sumptuous banquets. He personally made the arrangements, conducting the procession, mingling with guests at the banquets, and, to the dismay of guests, even performing with a troop of mimes (Livy 30.26.4–9).

The mixed activities in the shows of Paullus and Antiochos confirm the mutual exchange of ideas about performance culture between Rome and the Greek East, a discourse on sport and spectacle which continued in the Late Republic.

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Notes

- 1 Useful works include Friedländer (1964), Balsdon (1969), Carcopino (1975), Dunkle (2008), and Potter (2010, 2012, 163–320). More interpretive works include Barton (1993), Futrell (1997), Plass (1995), Toner (1995), and Fagan (2011).
- 2 For dispassionate approaches, see Hopkins (1983, 1–30), Wiedemann (1992), Kyle (1998), Potter (2010, 256–325), Beacham (1999), and Köhne and Ewigleben, eds. (2000).
- 3 Herodotus' tale of a famine and a migration is suspect, as is the Lydians' claim (1.94.4) that they invented games (dice, knucklebones, and ball games) as diversions, but the notion that Lydian women chose their husbands (1.93.4) suits the status of elite Etruscan females.
- 4 Thuillier (1976, 1981, 1985), Gori (1986–87), Decker and Thuillier (2004, 143–58) and Sannibale (2004).
- 5 Thuillier (1997) claims that “Grecocentrism” has led scholars to underestimate the distinctiveness of Etruscan games.
- 6 Miller (2004, 202), suggests that the depictions of Greek sport in the Tomb of the Biga may be based on the Greek vases “without direct contact with or knowledge of Greek athletics.” Etruscans did not compete in Greek athletic festivals, but Pausanias (5.12.5) says that Etruscan king Arimnestos was the first “barbarian” to make a dedication to Zeus at Olympia. Also, Etruscans, notably the city of Agylla (later Cerveteri), apparently made various dedications at Olympia and Delphi; see Scott 2010, 50, 69, 90, 92, 190, 215, and Appendix nos. 49, 50, 60, 119.
- 7 Bevagna (2014, 396), however, argues that Etruscan artists wanted to represent “... the factual reality of the competitions as they were conducted in their culture” and that their depictions of games show “a marked originality.”
- 8 Humphrey (1986) is essential, but Rawson (1981) and Harris (1972, 184–226) remain useful.
- 9 Thuillier (2012) suggests that the circus factions grew out of colors associated with various districts of Rome, and that they did not dominate the production of races until the time of Augustus.
- 10 On triumphs in the Late Republic and Early Empire, see Chapter 14.
- 11 For overviews, see Jennison (1937, 44–59), Toynbee (1973, 17–22),

Wiedemann (1992, 55–67), and Dunkle (2008, 207–44).

- 12 On baiting and tossing animals as Early Modern European entertainments, see Thomas (1983) and Turner (1980).
- 13 See Morgan (1975), Dumont (1988), and Csapo (1993).
- 14 A classic exercise by Geertz (1974a) in interpretive sociology explains that spectators' intense involvement in blood sports as "deep play" goes beyond diversion to a deeper symbolism about danger and social order.
- 15 Junkelmann (2000a, 2000b) and Potter (2010, 303–24). Further on spectatorship, see Fagan (2011), and Chapter 15 below.
- 16 Wiedemann (1992, 128–53) and Wistrand (1992, 14–29, 75–79).
- 17 Ville (1981, 2–6) sees the combat as an element in funeral games, with the object of spilling blood but not to killing the man. On depictions of Phersu, see Thuillier (1985, 124, 267, 338–40, 587–90). Avramidou (2009) reads the "game" as a parody of the myth of Orpheus.
- 18 See Rives (1995), Kyle (1998, 36–40, 43–50), and Dunkle (2008, 10–11).
- 19 Ville (1981, 7, 19–42), Wiedemann (1992, 30–34), and Potter (2012, 187–90).
- 20 Harris (1972, 44–74), cf. Mähl (1974), and Decker and Thuillier (2004, 159–77).
- 21 E.g., see Plutarch, *Mor.* 274d–e, on Greek athletes' immorality and military deficiency; see criticisms by imperial authors in Chapter 15.

Late Republic and Augustus: Spectacles, Popular Politics, and Empire

Adorn this capital with utter disregard of expense and make it magnificent with festivals of every kind. For it is fitting that we who rule over many people should surpass all men in all things, and brilliance of this sort, also, tends in a way to inspire our allies with respect for us and our enemies with terror.

Maecenas' advice to Augustus, Dio Cassius 52.30.1, Loeb trans. E. Cary.

By the late second and increasingly in the first century BCE rival Roman leaders enlarged and conflated existing spectacles, importing or inventing variations, to display their power and to court popular support (Beacham 1999, 1–44). The state-sponsored races in the Circus were well established by the Late Republic (133–31 BCE), but the political rivalries of the Roman Revolution led to expansions of violent spectacles, whether officially in festivals (*ludi*) or unofficially in privately organized funeral celebrations (*munera*). Great generals such as Sulla, Pompey, and Caesar, who all had experience in the Hellenistic East, used funeral and triumphal honors and the festival calendar as excuses to put on grander and more complex shows, which included increasing numbers of gladiators and beasts and also experimentation with Greek athletic performances.

Cicero complained about politically motivated public banquets, doles of meat, gladiatorial combats, and beast shows, but he recognized that the people expected aediles to provide spectacles (*Off.* 2.57–8, Loeb trans. W. Miller): “If therefore, such entertainment is demanded by the people, men of right judgment must at least consent to furnish it, even if they do not like the idea. But in so doing they should keep within their means, as I myself did.” He (*Mur.* 77) felt politicians should give the people their customary games and banquets, but do so out of generosity rather than ambition. Laws of 67 and 63 BCE (e.g., Cicero’s *lex Tullia de ambitu*) forbade electoral corruption (*ambitus*) by means of giving gladiatorial shows, banquets, or cash within two years of one’s candidacy for office, but candidates, especially aediles, sidestepped the laws.

The Meaning of Gladiatorial Combat: Infamy and Virtue

As G. Ville noted (1981, 228–55, 329–44), Romans, fascinated with the arena and its violence, had ambivalent feelings about gladiators, both reviling and respecting them. Recent works offer various explanations of the allure of the violence and the paradoxical symbolism of the gladiators in Roman society. Applying interpretive approaches, studies use the allure, violence, and virtues of gladiators to relate the arena to other phenomena (e.g., imperialism, emperorship, sacrifice, political suicide) and to broad social themes (e.g., death, desire, disorder). Wiedemann (1992, 102–27), for example, presents the arena as a marginal, liminal site where Romans gathered to honor the death of a great man with games, and also where they confronted the limits of human mortality in gladiatorial combats. He suggests that, by dying by the sword, despised gladiators in a sense overcame death and passed from social death to reintegration into society.¹

Relating the arena to the Romans' collective psychology during the disturbing transition from Republic to Empire, Barton (1993, 11–81) suggests that extremes of despair, desire, and envy caused Rome's "gladiator madness," the simultaneous degradation and exaltation of the gladiator. As the arena became the new battlefield for demonstrating *virtus*, gladiatorial combats became a form of simplified, purified soldiering, and the gladiator's willing participation recalled the notion of *devotio* or ceremonial self-sacrifice. Gladiators achieved an "inverse elevation," an escape from the humiliation of compulsion through enthusiastic complicity, an "empowerment" by collusion with their masters.

Using interpretive sociology, Plass (1995) approaches the arena in terms of the universal problem of social violence and the desire for order and security. He finds the arena's excessive violence consistent with the antithetical logic of liminal institutions, which incorporate potential dysfunction to assure proper function. Socially sanctioned violence in the arena incorporated disorder into order, restoring social routine, and reaffirming security.

Investigating the arena's allure for spectators, Fagan (2011) looks comparatively at violent public shows in ancient and later eras through the lens of social psychology. Seating arrangements in amphitheaters and preconceived notions ("affective dispositions") about the performers (in combats and executions) reinforced the attraction of gladiatorial "sports spectacles" (2011, 209–29).² Experiencing emotions, excitement, identification, or animosity, spectators also felt empowered by participating in determining whether defeated gladiators should be spared.

These and other works (e.g., Brown 1992; Edmondson 1996; Gunderson 1996) appropriately see gladiatorial combats as cultural performances in social and spectator contexts, but they do not agree on the essential nature of violence in Roman society or on one single explanation for a pluralistic phenomenon that had different attractions and meanings for different people over several centuries.

Historically, the symbolic dynamics of the gladiatorial combat—what its actions and participants meant to the Romans—cannot be separated from the military and political contexts of the Middle (264–133) and Late Republic (133–31 BCE), which included recurring, brutal warfare, anxiety persisting from the disastrous defeat at Cannae, the use of military captives as performers, and the growing popularity of their impressive and entertaining militaristic performances. Combats were introduced at Rome in 264, perhaps as a novelty, but gladiators were culturally constructed in Roman terms after 216. They became more appreciated, however ambivalently, under the Late Republic until they were fully institutionalized by Augustus.

Rome's earliest gladiators probably included violent criminals and rebellious slaves. Tertullian (*De spect.* 12) says early gladiators were “captives or slaves of criminal status (*mali status*).” Cicero (*Tusc.* 2.41) seems to suggest that in an earlier age criminals fought with swords to the death and taught discipline against pain and death. In the Late Republic, however, most gladiators were prisoners of war. The main early types of gladiators (e.g., Samnites, Thracians, and Gauls) were named after enemies of Rome, and early prisoners of war apparently were forced to fight with their own equipment in their own ethnic style. Complete social outsiders without rights or privileges but with some training and experience, prisoners were routed through slavery, a dehumanization as the “other,” undergoing further training and conditioning to become combative but controlled performers for Rome.

In the last third of the second century Lucilius mentions a famous victor and a despised loser, the first gladiators known by name: “In the public show given by the Flacci was a certain Aeserninus, a Samnite, a nasty fellow, worthy of that life and station. He was matched with Pacideianus, who was by far the best of all the gladiators since the creation of man.”³

Gladiators were owned privately, organized in groups (*familiae*), and prepared by trainers (*lanistae*). Sometimes former gladiators themselves, trainers were socially on the same disreputable level as procurers and undertakers. As well as the first known amphitheater (at Pompeii c. 70 BCE; see [Figure 14.1](#)), gladiatorial training facilities or schools (*ludi*) arose from at least the late second century, notably at Capua and sites around the Bay of Naples. As remains of the gladiatorial barracks at Pompeii and the Ludus Magnus (the imperial school) at Rome show, gladiators lived in small cells, but they were not routinely chained or locked up. To prepare them for the arena, and to protect their investment, owners provided them with modest but healthy food, medical attention, and extensive training.⁴



Figure 14.1 Amphitheater at Pompeii.

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Upon entering a gladiatorial school, recruits swore an oath (*sacramentum*) to be “burned by fire, bound in chains, to be beaten, to die by the sword” (Sen. *Ep.* 4.37.1). All these, except the last, were severe affronts to the dignity of a citizen and the integrity of his body. Whatever their social origins, all gladiators in service were all equal as slaves, bound by their nominally voluntary oath, which mitigated Rome’s responsibility and guilt. Knowing that they could save and redeem themselves only by skill and courage, gladiators embraced a militaristic esprit de corps and took professional pride in fighting- and if necessary dying- with courage and discipline. In time they became motivated both by the desire to perform well, to win rewards, fame, and freedom, and also by the fear of failure- of defeat and dishonor as well as of death.

In the Late Republic ambitious leaders used gladiators in shows with increasing numbers and frequency because the combats were spectacularly appealing and politically effective. In 122 BCE Gaius Gracchus, seeking popular support as tribune (a magistrate elected to protect the interests of the lower class citizens), took down the barriers built around an arena in the Forum for a gladiatorial show and opened spectatorship freely to all (Plut. *C. Gracch.* 12.3–4). Romans increasingly expected and appreciated violent shows, and the performances developed a hierarchy of craft or entertainment value, with gladiators as star attractions. Florus (1.47.10) claims politics changed what had been a punishment for enemies into an art (*supplicia quondam hostium artem faceret*). Gladiatorial combats became carefully

arranged duels between well-matched opponents, providing the entertaining element of suspense and unpredictability essential to a sport. Romans became sports fans who recognized skilled performances. Rome gave increased privileges to gladiators as models of martial virtue and as specialized providers of mass entertainment. Death and victory were probably the only options for the first gladiators, but later gladiators merited improved chances of survival. Sparing losers probably arose as a way for spectators to express appreciation or as an economic measure by owners reluctant to waste resources. The first reference to awarding the *rudis*, the wooden sword symbolizing release from the arena, is from Cicero (*Phil.* 2.29.74). By his time gladiators were essential stars in Rome's entertainment industry, performers to be elevated and not just eliminated.

The images and worlds of gladiators and soldiers increasingly overlapped in the Late Republic. Formerly misinterpreted as the introduction of official *munera*, Rutilius Rufus as consul in 105 BCE began the practice of using gladiatorial trainers to instruct landless army recruits. The Roman defeat at Arausio by the Cimbri and Teutones in 105 was the worst since Cannae, and Rome in crisis turned to the famous general Gaius Marius and to gladiatorial instructors. From the school of Aurelius Scaurus at Capua, the earliest recorded private gladiatorial school, the instructors taught skills and also probably the virtue of facing death without surrendering (Val. Max. 2.3.2). Gladiators and soldiers wore essentially the same equipment (i.e., late-Hellenistic hybrid helmet, large tall shield; Junkelmann 2000, 31–8), and they underwent similar training (e.g., sword practice against a wooden post). In the Late Republic various types of gladiators fought against opponents of the same type. The most popular type apparently was the Samnite, a heavily armed figure with a helmet and sword, a guard on his right arm, and probably a greave on his left leg. Another type, Provocators also fought with a greave and arm guard, but they had a partial breastplate, a medium size oval shield, a short straight sword, and the “Imperial Gallic” type helmet. The latest army model in the Augustan period, this helmet had large neck and cheek guards, and feathers at its sides.

While admiring gladiators' military prowess, Romans still saw them as threatening, uncivilized outsiders, not as the ideal, patriotic, landholding citizen-soldiers of early Rome. There was no Roman type of gladiator because producers would not have risked- and crowds would not have tolerated- the possible defeat of a fighter representing Rome. Romans identified not with the actual individual gladiator- a lowly, despicable foreigner, but rather with the skills and virtues that Rome gave him through training, and that Rome demanded he display- or else.

When the gladiator revolt of Spartacus turned into the slave war of 73–71 BCE, it traumatized Rome. Whatever his origins, Spartacus was a trained gladiator, and he and other skilled fighters became rebel soldiers against

Rome- the complete opposite of 216 when Rome trained slaves to be soldiers for Rome (see [Chapter 13](#)). Inverting Roman customs, Spartacus supposedly honored his dead officers at their funerals with forced fights of Roman captives; he went from being a gladiator to being a provider of combats (Florus 2.8.9). Although initially disdaining the war as merely a matter of slaves, Romans grudgingly had to respect the virtues of Spartacus' army (App. *BCiv.* 1.118; Flor. 1.47.5). Florus (2.8.14) says Spartacus' men fought to the death as befit men "led by a gladiator."

As gladiatorial combats became more professionalized in the Late Republic, the imagery of gladiators became more ambivalent. Romans feared and despised gladiators for their lowly or alien social origins or their heinous crimes, but they also associated the impressive performers with glory, military discipline, and eroticism. No wonder Tertullian (*De spect.* 22, Loeb trans. T.R. Glover) later presented the Romans as inconsistent, fickle, and confused because they both glorified and degraded gladiators: "The perversity of it! They love whom they lower; they despise whom they approve; the art they glorify, the artist they disgrace (*artem magnificant, artificem notant*)." If they put on a good show, gladiators might escape the arena, but they never escaped the stigma of their origins or of their profession. As Tertullian remarks and law codes attest, even if they became freedmen, former gladiators were barred from certain offices and even some cemeteries. Living beyond the edge of respectable society, they were glorified by spectators but not wanted as neighbors, magistrates, or in-laws. Like actors, criminals, debtors, prostitutes, and gravediggers, gladiators were marked with the indelible infamy (*infamia*, a moral stigma and a legal status of diminished rights) associated with their performances.

Despite their origins, gladiators became professional performers who were trained, talented, and recompensed (by contracted wages or prizes won). They were specialized weapons fighters, expert craftsmen bound by a sacred oath to train, suffer, and fight with decorum until killed or released. Their virtues and actions became increasingly inconsistent with their social origins and status, hence the symbolic paradox of the gladiator. As Tertullian said, Romans loved the art (the orchestrated performances of virtue and skill) but still hated the artist (the threatening, guilty outsider).

Sulla, Pompey, and Caesar: Magnificence and Munificence

Ambitious leaders learned from each other's spectacles, and the ambitious general Sulla clearly understood the value of public performances. Shows with elephants and lions had been increasing, but Sulla, in his praetorship in 93 BCE, was the first to give a beast fight with 100 maned lions (Plut. *Sull.* 5.1; Plin. *HN* 8.20.53), which, contrary to earlier practice, were not chained

together (Sen. *De Brev. Vit.* 13.6). The lions and the hunters who killed them with javelins were a gift from King Bocchus of Mauretania. Demonstrating his ruthlessness, in 82 Sulla had 6000 Samnite rebels from the Civil War executed in the Circus Flaminius while the Senate met within earshot. In 81 Sulla held great votive games, the *Ludi Victoriae Sullae*, which became an annual festival. In his great triumph in 81 he displayed rich and exotic spoils from the war against Mithridates. Presenting Sulla as a deliverer, his procession also included political exiles and their families (who fled when the supporters of Marius took control of Rome), who were told to proclaim him “savior” and “father.” At the end of the triumph he gave a speech and asked the people to declare him *Felix* (Fortunate), and he provided extravagant feasts for the people (Plut. *Sull.* 34.1–2, 35.1). Later in 81, when his wife Metella died, Sulla honored her with a gladiatorial spectacle (Plut. *Sull.* 35.3).

Sulla also dealt with Greek sanctuaries and games. Needing resources to attack Athens during the war against Mithridates in 86, he seized riches from the sanctuaries of Olympia, Epidauros, and Delphi, but he was careful later to arrange reimbursements by taking territory from Thebes (Plut. *Sull.* 12.1–6, 19.6). Later Sulla transferred most of the events of the Greek Olympics of 80 to Rome (App. *BCiv.* 1.99), probably leaving only the boys’ *stadion* to be held at Olympia (Matthews 1979). After Sulla others consciously followed his example in terms of spectacular extravagance, political violence, and Greek games (Sumi 2002). In 58 Sulla’s stepson, the aedile M. Aemilius Scaurus, who was notorious for his lavish shows, put on a grand athletic contest (Val. Max. 2.4.7), possibly adding games with athletes to the regular festival calendar for the first time. Although Greek athletic contests were part of the triumphal shows of Pompey and Caesar, they remained somewhat suspect until the Early Empire.

It was Sulla who granted Pompey “the Great” his first triumph in 81 (or 80). Having hunted lions and elephants in North Africa (Plut. *Pomp.* 12.8), Pompey wanted to enter Rome in a chariot pulled by four elephants, but the narrowness of the gates forced him to use horses instead (Plut. *Pomp.* 14.4; Plin. *HN* 8.2.4). After another grand triumph in 71, Pompey’s third and most magnificent triumph in September of 61 BCE, after he defeated Mithridates, celebrated his victory over three continents. Appian (*Mith.* 116–7) calls it the most lavish triumph Rome had yet seen. The procession over two days included wagons full of gold and treasures, over 300 enemy leaders and generals, and painted scenes of triumph. In a bejeweled chariot, Pompey wore the supposed cloak of Alexander the Great, with whom he had become obsessed in the East.

In 55 Pompey dedicated Rome’s first stone theater, in the Campus Martius, with several stage, musical, and athletic performances (Plut. *Pom.* 52.4; Dio 39.38). He also put on hunts in the Circus Maximus for five days in which 500 or 600 lions and some 400 other African beasts- including the first rhinoceros

at Rome- died (Dio 39.38.2). In a famous episode Gaetulian hunters with spears attacked 20 elephants on the last day (Plin. *HN* 8.7.20–1; Dio 39.38.2–4; Sen. *De Brev. Vit.* 13.6). The terrified elephants tried to break through the iron railings, seeming to cry and beg for mercy almost like humans, which upset the spectators. Cicero (*Fam.* 7.1.3, Loeb trans. W.G. Williams; similarly Plin. *HN* 8.121) claims that he scorned the elephant hunt: “... the mob and crowd was greatly impressed, but manifested no pleasure. Indeed the result was a certain compassion (*misericordia*) and a kind of feeling that huge beast has a fellowship with the human race.” Rather than sincerely expressing sympathy for the beasts—no beasts were spared—the authors and the crowd criticized Pompey’s egotistical and botched show for its nearly disastrous lack of control and of safety and pride for spectators (Shelton 1999).

Ambitious politicians used networks of personal connections to acquire beasts for shows. In 51 when Cicero was governor of Cilicia his friend M. Caelius Rufus, elected aedile for 50, wrote to him repeatedly, pleading for him to supply him with leopards so that he could put on an impressive show and gain political mileage (Cic. *Fam.* 8.2.2, 8.8.10, 8.9.3; Plut. *Cic.* 36.6). Cicero replied that he was trying but that there was a scarcity of such beasts (*Fam.* 2.11.2).

In many ways Julius Caesar’s career signaled Rome’s need for emperorship and imperial entertainment policies. Perhaps anticipating a Hellenistic-style kingship, Caesar saw the wisdom of generously giving entertainments to the people. His spectacles were innovative in scale, contexts, and contents.⁵ Fully appreciating the political potential of the arena, Caesar broke the Republic’s traditional restriction of gladiatorial *munera* to privately sponsored funerals for recently deceased male relatives. As aedile in 65 he held games for his long (20 years) dead father with gladiators, stage plays, and a combat of criminals with silver weapons against beasts (Plin. *HN* 33.16.53). He kept gladiatorial troops at Capua and assembled so many gladiators at Rome in 65 that a bill was passed limiting the number that anyone could keep in the city to 320 pairs (Suet. *Iul.* 10.1–2; Plut. *Caes.* 5). The excuse was fear of gladiator revolts, but the true concern was Caesar’s pursuit of excess popularity.

Returning from Spain in 60, Caesar surprised the senators who were trying to slow down his career. Declining the Senate’s offer of a triumph, he entered the city to stand for the consulship. With opportunistic foresight, Caesar anticipated a consular command in Gaul that could, and did, lead to an even grander triumph. Suetonius (*Iul.* 22.1) says Caesar, as consul, chose Gaul as his province because it probably would make him rich and supply resources for triumphs.

Caesar’s great triumphal games in 46, late in the Civil Wars, trumped even those of Pompey. Pompey set the stage, but Caesar stole the show. He celebrated four triumphs (for Gaul, Egypt, Pontus, Libya; Suet. *Iul.* 37–9) in one month (August) and a fifth (for Spain) not much later (Beacham 1999,

76–81). As Suetonius details, the games in 46, which also celebrated the consecration of his Temple of Venus Genetrix, were the grandest Rome had yet seen, a truly spectacular combination of events held in several sites in front of large crowds (*Iul.* 39.1–4). The entertainments included gladiatorial combats, stage shows, circus races, pyrrhic military dances by Asian captives, the Game of Troy (*Lusus Troiae*, an equestrian performance held once before by Sulla), five successive days of beast combats, a staged military battle in the Circus with 1000 soldiers, 40 elephants, and 60 cavalymen, athletic contests in a temporary stadium in the Campus Martius, and even a staged naval battle. Suetonius claims the crowds were so enormous that many people perished, including two senators.

Significantly, Caesar's spectacles combined many earlier activities (e.g., gladiators, stage plays) with new variations such as athletic contests, the Game of Troy (recalling the supposedly Trojan origins of Caesar's ancestors), and mock battles on land and on water. Sources also note that members of the elite (a descendant of a praetor and a former senator) performed in gladiatorial combats and on stage (Dio 43.23.5; Suet. *Iul.* 39.1). Caesar's beast shows in 46 included a hunt with 400 lions and the first display of a giraffe at Rome (Plin. *HN* 8.27.69), and in his Gallic triumph he ascended the Capitoline Hill with 40 elephants bearing torches. As dictator in 45 Caesar staged Rome's first Thessalian-style bull fight, perhaps having seen such events while campaigning against Pompey in Greece (Plin. *HN* 8.70.182).

Caesar also was innovative in 46 in his use of space and construction of facilities for shows. His temporary stadium in the Campus Martius (Suet. *Iul.* 39.4) was the first known stadium built at Rome. Greek sports previously took place in the Circus Maximus. For his hunts he constructed a temporary wooden amphitheater in the Forum, probably with underground passages with lifts and trap doors. Dio (43.22.3) calls it a "hunting theater" (*theatron kynegetikon*), his usual term for an amphitheater. Caesar also gave the first *naumachia*, a term applied to both staged sea battles and to the facilities for them—large shallow basins with banks of seats for spectators (Coleman 1993). These shows reenacted famous non-Roman naval battles with actual ships and large numbers of victims. Caesar had a special basin dug in the Campus Martius, and 4000 oarsmen and 2000 fighters in costume recreated a battle between Tyrians and Egyptians (Dio 45.17.8). Rather than harmless military displays or combats of professional gladiators, these staged battles were spectacular mass executions of captives.

After his quadruple triumph in 46, before leaving for Spain to finish the Civil Wars, Caesar held a gladiatorial show in the Forum with the excuse that it was for his daughter Julia, who died eight years earlier. He arranged a public feast and paid special attention to the preparations for the combats (Suet. *Iul.* 26.2–3, Loeb trans. J.C. Rolfe):

He gave orders too that whenever famous gladiators fought without winning the favor of the people, they should be rescued by force and kept for him. He had the novices trained, not in a gladiatorial school by professionals, but in private houses by Roman knights and even by senators who were skilled in arms

Caesar's policy of rescuing famous fighters and using elite Romans to train gladiatorial recruits anticipated aspects of Augustus' policies. Returning from Spain, Caesar held a fifth triumph in 45 with more shows, and he dedicated the Temple of Venus Genetrix with games, which became annual as the *Ludi Victoriae Caesaris*.

When Mark Antony offered him a crown at the Lupercalia (in February of 44; Plut. *Caes.* 61.1–4; Dio 44.6.1), Caesar was sitting on a golden throne wearing triumphal robes. His excessive honors (e.g., perpetual dictator, his statue among the gods in circus processions) became more than some conservative politicians could bear. Spectacles were escalating and too much power and glory focused on Caesar himself. After Caesar's assassination, Augustus faced and solved the problem of turning the divisive political competition to provide shows into a cohesive imperial system (see [Map 14.1](#)).



Map 14.1 Map of the Roman Empire in 27 BCE.

Augustus: Consolidation and Imperial Rule Through Shows

Augustus played a pivotal role in Rome's successful transition from Republic

to Principate, and much of the durability of Rome's culture (*Romanitas*), society, and Empire was due to his long rule. After the chaos and rogue violence of the civil wars, Augustus, the former Octavius, had to tame and train Rome. With Italian roots and an ecumenical, imperial vision, Augustus understood the popularity of sport and its value for public relations, and he implemented a conscious and very successful policy on games and spectacles. Suetonius (*Aug.* 43.1, Loeb trans. J.C. Rolfe) says, "He surpassed all his predecessors in the frequency, variety and magnificence of his public shows." He followed Caesar in giving lavish and varied games with both Roman and Greek entertainments, but Augustus was more patient and thorough. A master of imagery, he was profoundly aware of the political capital of shows and of his own role-playing in public (Beacham 1999, 92–154). He established for future emperors the model of how to finance, produce, control, and preside at games. As A. Spawforth (2007, 384) says, Augustus "... became the paradeigmatic emperor."

Augustus the showman

Augustus' personal attention to shows explains their prominence in the *Res Gestae*, his account of his accomplishments, which was publicly displayed after his death. Portraying his motives and actions as he wanted them remembered, Augustus depicts himself as the ideal citizen and emperor. The document is rich with reliable statistical information (*RG* 22.1–3). At eight gladiatorial games given by him (in his own name or the names of his sons or grandsons) c. 10,000 men took part in combats. Three times (in his name or that of his grandson) he presented shows of athletes (*spectaculum athletarum*) gathered from about the empire. He also presented 27 shows (in the theater or circus) in his own name or for other magistrates. As he had vowed in 42, in 2 BCE he built a Temple of Mars in his forum and introduced the games of Mars, which the consuls produced annually thereafter. He also gave 26 beast shows (in his name or that of sons and grandsons) in the circus, forum, or amphitheater, and in these 3500 beasts "were killed." In 2 BCE he arranged a *naumachia* at a specially dug basin across the Tiber. Thirty warships and also smaller vessels and c. 3000 men (not including the rowers) fought in a staging of the Battle of Salamis.

Presenting Augustus as a virtuous *triumphator*, the *Res Gestae* (4.1) notes that he had two ovations and three triumphs and was hailed as *imperator* 21 times. His three triumphs, for Dalmatia, Actium, and Egypt, took place over three days in August of 29 BCE, and many beasts, including a rhinoceros and a hippopotamus, were killed (Dio 51.22.5). As part of a civil war the Battle of Actium was unworthy of a triumph, but Augustus had presented it as proper foreign war against Cleopatra, and the triumph went unopposed. He later declined three more triumphs offered by the Senate, avoiding Caesar's mistake of accepting excessive honors.

Drawing from the *Res Gestae* at times (e.g., on numbers of shows), Suetonius also mentions, at length and often with salacious details, many actions and incidents relating to games under Augustus (*Aug.* 43–5). He demonstrates the diversity and inclusiveness of Augustus’ games, with Augustus himself as consistently magnanimous and seemingly omnipresent. Suetonius and the *Res Gestae* show that Augustus provided games to demonstrate his generosity to the people, his piety to the gods, and his devotion to his family. His spectacles reveal his respect for tradition but openness to effective innovation, his syncretic view of the empire, and his agenda of accommodating- within structure- the different elements and interests of the people he ruled. In his games policy and his administration overall, Augustus managed a “restoration” combining old and new elements. In 17 BCE, with his then son-in-law Agrippa, he put on the Secular Games. Supposedly the Sibylline oracle ordered this elaborate festival to celebrate a new era (*saeculum*), but Augustus designed and artificially timed it to correspond to the passage of his “Julian” morality laws and his adoption of his grandsons Gaius and Lucius. The festival was to thank the gods Apollo (often associated with Augustus in his imagery) and Diana, but the message was that Augustus was founding a grand new Roman age of peace, prosperity, fertility, piety, and virtue (Beacham 1999, 114–18). A senatorial decree (*CIL* VI no. 32.323 = *ILS* no. 5050) and Horace’s *Secular Hymn* indicate that the three-day festival included sacrifices and prayers by Augustus and Agrippa, as well as theatrical performances, chariot races, trick riders, and animal hunts.

Locations and facilities

Augustus understood the role of shows in the city life of Rome, and his building projects included new performance venues. Echoing his account of Caesar’s games and showing Augustus’ attention to the topography of shows, Suetonius (*Aug.* 43.1) says Augustus staged theatrical shows at numerous locations all over the city, and that he held gladiatorial combats in the Forum, the amphitheater, and also in the Circus and the Saepta (a gathering site in the Campus Martius renovated by Agrippa). He held athletic contests in the Campus Martius and built wooden seats for spectators. Augustus also held a sea-fight on the large artificial lake he built near the Tiber. Around 30–28 BCE he built a shrine (the *pulvinar*) in the Circus Maximus, and he added an Egyptian obelisk to the barrier in the racetrack. The portico of the Circus Flaminius was built in 33, and the Theater of Marcellus, his son-in-law, was completed in 11 BCE (see [Map 15.1](#)).

Apparently Augustus contemplated building an amphitheater in downtown Rome, and Vespasian later learned of his idea (Suet. *Vesp.* 9.1); but it was Statilius Taurus, a general at Actium, who, with his general’s portion of plunder from his campaigns in Africa, built Rome’s first stone amphitheater. Dio (51.23.1) says Taurus constructed a stone (and wood) “hunting theater”

(*theatron kynegetikon*) in the Campus Martius at his own expense and dedicated it with a gladiatorial combat. Perhaps even Augustus balked at building such an expensive facility, or perhaps Taurus' ties and loyalty to Augustus were sufficient motivation. The first major building dedicated in Rome after Actium, it was completed in time for Augustus' triple triumph of 29 (but destroyed in the fire of 64 CE; Coleman 2003). It is noteworthy that the Roman colony at Mérida (Augusta Emerita) in Spain built a theater and amphitheater dedicated to Augustus in 8 BCE (see [Figure 14.2](#)).



Figure 14.2 Amphitheater at Mérida (colony of *Augusta Emerita*), inaugurated 8 BCE, Spain.

Courtesy Donald G. Kyle.

Augustus was attentive to proper seating arrangements—hierarchically organized by social status—at shows, and he expected decorous behavior in the stands (Suet. *Aug.* 44; Rawson 1987). He prompted a senatorial decree (the *Lex Julia Theatralis*) that the first row of seats at any spectacle was for senators only, and he regulated seating arrangements for provincials, soldiers, boys, and other groups. He prohibited women from watching gladiators except from the highest section of seats, not allowing them to sit among the men as they had earlier. The Vestal Virgins were exceptions to this, with seats at the lower level. Perhaps because of the nudity of Greek athletes, Augustus excluded women from viewing athletic contests, scheduling a boxing match early in the morning and not allowing women to arrive until it was over (Suet. *Aug.* 44).

Elite performers, novelties, and oddities

As he had with Caesar, Suetonius takes particular note of Augustus' efforts to involve free, non-professional, and even elite Romans in public performances. He included youths of the highest nobility (*ex nobilissima iuventute*, Aug. 43.2–3) in shows in the Circus. Augustus also often put on performances of the Game of Troy (an ancient game according to Virgil, *Aen.* 5.545–603) as a military ride by noble youths, which he favored as a traditional and worthy display. In time, however, accidents led to the cancellation of that event. His fostering of the *iuventus* or cadet training for clubs of elite youths, a combination of physical, civic, and military training reminiscent of the *ephebeia* (see [Chapter 12](#)), was consistent with his concern for the army and the youth of Italy. Perhaps with a mind to Greek customs, Augustus was inclined to have Romans of status, both youthful and mature, perform in games, but conservatives in the Senate were not so open-minded. Augustus put Romans of the equestrian class in his theatrical and gladiatorial productions, but he stopped that when the Senate argued that it was forbidden.

Augustus even shared a popular interest in exotic animals and human curiosities, and he personally controlled the presentation of such creatures.⁶ He showed a dwarf of noble lineage who was under 60 cm tall and supposedly weighed less than 7.7 kg; and he presented the first Parthian captives seen at Rome “as a display” (*ad spectaculum*) at a gladiatorial show, parading them through the arena and into the stands (Suet. Aug. 43.3–4). He also staged *ad hoc* exhibitions outside of games. He introduced tigers at the dedication of the Theater of Marcellus, a huge snake in front of the Comitium, and crocodiles in a pool in the Circus Flaminius. Such exotic animals, some of them gifts brought by embassies from India and elsewhere, may have just been displayed under Augustus, but earlier and later most beasts in shows were killed.

Suetonius (Aug. 45.2) also mentions that Augustus was a boxing enthusiast, that he liked to watch Latin boxers, even if they were not professionals, that he would match them against Greek professionals, and that he even watched combats of untrained street fighters. As Suetonius (45.3) concludes, Augustus endorsed by his interest “all types of performers” in his spectacles.

Greek entertainments

Augustus understood the potential of presenting Greek contests as well as Roman spectacles. Taking a culturally inclusive approach, he fostered games and festivals in the eastern provinces. He probably learned of Mark Antony's patronage of Greek athletic guilds in the East (see [Chapter 15](#), pages 320–21), and he maintained and increased the privileges of Greek athletes in professional guilds (Suet. Aug. 45.3). As well as arranging three athletic performances at Rome, he created (or allowed the creation in his honor of) contests modeled on the Greek sacred crown games, both in Greece and in

Italy.

To honor his victory at Actium in 31, in 28/27 Augustus expanded some local games to Apollo into the Actian Games (the *Aktia*) to Poseidon at the new city of Nikopolis (which he built in Greece near the site of Actium) and at Rome. With reed wreaths, the games included athletic games (in three age classes), equestrian and musical contests, and, appropriately, even a boat regatta. The games went on for days, and when Augustus became ill, Agrippa stood in for him (Dio 53.1.4–5). These quadrennial Actian games were elevated to Isolympic status (despite their musical contest) and added to the Greek circuit of sacred crown games, and they continued until the late third century.⁷

Similarly, at Naples in 2 CE the quadrennial Augustalia or Sebastan Games (*Italica Romaia Sebasta* [*Sebastos* is Greek for Augustus] *Isolympica*) were established for Augustus, and a stadium was built. Strabo (5.4.7) correctly says these games became famous. Though Isolympic, these games included musical and dramatic contests (possibly added after the death of Augustus) with cash prizes, as well as hippic and gymnastic contests with wreaths of wheat as prizes, and there were sacrifices to the emperor (Suet. *Aug.* 98.5; Dio 55.10.9, 56.29.2). A detailed inscription found at Olympia (*IO* 56.11–28; Geer 1935; Crowther 1989) clarifies various regulations: the age category for boys, contrary to Olympia, was from 17 to 20; there was a 30-day training period with a daily stipend (*obsonion*) for expenses; athletes must register by their official names or in some legally valid way (or they could be fined, and flogged for not paying the fine); and the justifications for being late included illness, piracy, and shipwreck.

The recent archaeological discovery at Naples of a temple to the divine Augustus (Banyasz and Rose 2008) is adding details about the games. Numerous stone panels from in front of the temple, one of which declares that the games are Isolympic, list victors (in gymnastic, hippic, writing, theatrical, and musical events) and their hometowns (many are from Asia Minor) in the first to second century CE. We knew previously of races for daughters of magistrates at the Sebasta (see [Chapter 11](#)) and the new lists include female victors, notably one Thalassia from Ephesos.

Both the Sebastan and Actian games confirm Augustus' broad patronage of Classical Greek culture and sport to show good will to the Greek East and to aid imperial unification.⁸

Augustus and Herod of Judea

Augustus fostered an eclectic mix of entertainments throughout the empire, including Judea, where earlier games policies by foreign leaders had met with strong opposition. The Seleucid king, Antiochos IV Epiphanes (see [Chapter 13](#)), captured Jerusalem in 169 BCE and tried to suppress the Jewish religion, in part by fostering the Hellenization of Judea through Greek sport and

religion.⁹ He granted permission to Jason, the high priest of Jerusalem, to create athletic facilities and promote Greek athletics. According to an indignant source (*Maccabees* 2.4.9–15, 18–19), some locals responded enthusiastically. Jason enrolled Jews in Jerusalem as citizens of Antioch, and he and a delegation of these new citizens attended the quadrennial games at Tyre. Ultimately, Antiochos' policies provoked the revolt of the Maccabees (173–64 BCE).

Augustus was more diplomatic, and he had a ready ally in King Herod the Great (c. 73–4 BCE), who, while sailing to Rome, had financially patronized Ancient Olympia and become President (*agonothetes*) for the games in 12 BCE (Joseph. *BJ* 1.426–8). After completing Kaisareia Sebaste (Caesarea Maritima, c. 22–10, on the coast of Judea), including a Temple of Roma and Augustus, a theater, and a hippo-stadium complex, which accommodated both gymnastic and equestrian events, in 10/9 BCE, Herod dedicated his new capital with an extravagant festival.¹⁰ Josephus (*AJ* 16.136–41, *BJ* 1.421) says Herod held mixed games including musical and gymnastic contests, gladiator and beast fights, horse races, and more, with valuable prizes for first, second, and third places (Weiss 1996, 1999). He dedicated the games to Augustus and made them quadrennial and stephanitic. Josephus adds that Augustus supplied everything needed for the shows, and Livia also donated a large amount of money. Herod himself provided lodging and entertainment for the great number of official guests.

Josephus praises Herod for his benefactions and for holding the games, and he describes Herod in terms reminiscent of Near Eastern kingship (*BJ* 1.430): the king was powerful of body and mind, an excellent hunter and horseman who killed 40 animals (boars, stags, wild asses) in a single day, and he was a magnificent warrior who amazed spectators with the accuracy of his javelin throws and arrows in target shooting.

With imperial subsidization, and as a Hellenistic client king, Herod promoted Augustus' image and expansive games policy. He also built several athletic and equestrian facilities elsewhere throughout Judea. Both Herod and Josephus agreed that acceptance of Roman imperial rule was necessary. Although there was resistance, in time the province adjusted to Roman as well as Greek entertainments.

The “First Citizen” (Princeps) as spectator

An attentive fan of games, Augustus was more attuned to average Romans than the brilliant but aloof Julius Caesar. Augustus would not let ill health or danger prevent him from appearing at shows: he had to be carried on a litter once, once his chair collapsed, and once he sat in a certain section of seats to show spectators that it was safe (Suet. *Aug.* 43.5). He watched the chariot races from the homes of associates overlooking the racetrack, or at other times

from his imperial box in the stands. Sometimes Livia and children of the family joined him. When he had to be absent, he excused himself and sent people to represent him. He watched shows intently and carefully, perhaps because Caesar had been criticized for doing paperwork at shows, or because, as he admitted, he personally enjoyed and was sincerely interested in the events. Sometimes Augustus participated as a patron and prize-giver: he gave special prizes and gifts, which he paid for himself, at other people's shows; and at Greek-style performances (athletic or theatrical) he always gave an appropriate present to each performer (Suet. *Aug.* 45.1–2).

Augustus' last days in 14 CE confirm his enthusiasm for performances and imperial harmony. Ill and anticipating his end, he left Rome and spent several days relaxing at his villa at Capri. Suetonius says (*Aug.* 98.3–5) that he had local Romans and Greeks switch their ethnic costumes and speak each other's language. He also watched the gymnastic exercises of the Greek ephebes at Capri, and he hosted the youths to a Roman banquet and threw out tickets for presents. He then crossed to Naples, and, although gravely ill, he watched the third performance of the Sebasta contests that honored him. After the games he set out for Beneventum but died at Nola.

Augustus and Virgil

Like Aeneas celebrating lavish funeral games for his father Anchises in Book 5 of the *Aeneid*, Augustus was careful to present himself at spectacles not as an aggressive or vain competitor but as an appreciative spectator, a fair and pious administrator, and a generous provider of prizes and rewards. While inspired by Homer's *Iliad* 23 (e.g., with a footrace, boxing match, and archery contest), Virgil's funeral games took on aspects from contemporary Rome, the career of Augustus, and his appreciation of Greek culture and sport. Aeneas is both Achillean and Augustan as a dutiful, generous, and conciliatory organizer of games. A boat race (an event in Augustus' Actian games) replaces Homer's chariot race, and Aeneas' son Ascanius, ancestor of the Julian clan, participates in the Trojan Game (*Aen.* 5.545–603), an event that, as noted above, Augustus supported. Virgil also adds allusions to Augustus' piety, his filial devotion to Caesar, his naval victory at Actium, his espousal of virtue and proper morality, and his administration of games at Rome. With themes of longing, homecoming, and heroic identity recalling Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil uses the games to aid the transition of Aeneas and his Trojans into the forebears of the Romans with their fated glories.¹¹

Augustus the ringmaster: Regulating the arena

To help stabilize Rome in the transition from Republic to Empire, Augustus took control of the arena. Traditionally, festivals (*ludi*) were provided by the state (often via ambitious aediles), and arena games (*munera*) were the

personal gift of the producer; but Augustus overhauled this unsystematic and dangerously volatile arrangement. He institutionalized and centralized *munera* on an official basis, and he laid the foundation for the imperial administration of games. Augustus used arena shows as another device conjoining his personal patronage as “father of the country” with the staging of official performances. In 22 BCE he limited praetors to two shows while in office, with a maximum of 120 gladiators; the funding came from the state, and the praetors could not put on grander games through personal conspicuous consumption (Dio 54.2.3–4). (Domitian took the idea further: only emperors were allowed to give games at Rome, and games beyond Rome required permission.) Augustus astutely monopolized the political value of producing gladiatorial combats, limiting to the imperial family the right to stage legitimized violence in Rome, and demonstrating the hierarchy of the Princeps above magistrates (Wiedemann 1992, 8, 132–4). His centralized, official *munera* articulated a message of control but also one of imperial patronage and attentiveness.

Perhaps inspired by Caesar’s attempts to save and accumulate gladiators, Augustus forbade the holding of gladiatorial combats *sine missione* (Suet. *Aug.* 45.3, *Ner.* 4). Predisposed to condemn the combats as murderous, earlier scholars interpreted this phrase as fights “to the death,” with no quarter-combats in which the loser always died, or victors were forced to fight again until they eventually died. D. Potter (2010, 307, 2012, 217 and n. 7) has clarified the phrase to mean contests that did not go to a decision. Augustus wanted all fights to continue to the point of *missio* (a defeated gladiator raised his finger as an appeal for a reprieve from death by popular decision; see [Figure 14.3](#)). Gladiators were trained to injure, but not intentionally kill, their opponents before a decision, which would be wasteful, nor were combats to end prematurely without a clear victory and an appeal to the crowd, thus disenfranchising spectators by denying them their say. By demanding victories and decisions Augustus assured quality, guaranteed the possibility of survival for the gladiators, and further engaged the people in the process and outcome of the combats. By saving and not slaughtering gladiators, he endorsed their elevation as valuable performers. Although he demanded strict discipline in wrestling and gladiatorial combats, and he was severe in punishing actors for immoral behavior and vulgar gestures (Suet. *Aug.* 45.4), Augustus realized that talented performers were too valuable to be squandered. Not simply magnanimous, Augustus was managing resources wisely.



Figure 14.3 Mosaic from Zliten, Libya, showing a defeated gladiator raising his index finger and appealing for release (*missio*), third century CE. Tripoli, Archäologisches Museum.

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It was probably under Augustus that arena shows settled into a tripartite routine, termed *munera legitima*. Around nine in the morning there were *matutina*, beast shows with hunting or fighting of beasts by trained, well-equipped hunters. (Hunters (*venatores*) and beast handlers and fighters (*bestiarii*) became interchangeable as types of beast performers.) At noon spectators might leave or stay to watch the *meridiani*- the “noontime shows,” which included elaborate public executions of criminals. By mid afternoon spectators convened to watch the proper gladiatorial combats. Augustus also probably designed an efficient empire-wide administrative system for gladiatorial combats using procurators (*procuratores familiae gladiatoriae*). He perhaps even began the system of imperial gladiatorial training schools. With his reforms, and with the standardization of rules, equipment (e.g., visored helmets), and procedures (e.g., matching opponents of different types) under his rule, Augustus arguably institutionalized gladiatorial combats as a national (and imperial) Roman sport- a brutal blood sport, yes, but a professional spectator sport nonetheless (Junkelmann 2000, 35–7).

The *Res Gestae* and Suetonius concentrate on Rome, but entertainments emblematic of Roman culture, notably the blood sports, spread throughout the empire under Augustus and later emperors. Holding games annually at their own expense, especially beast and gladiatorial shows, was a responsibility of the provincial high priests of the emperor cult, which Augustus diplomatically but widely dispersed. Ambitious provincials also voluntarily funded shows or facilities in their cities as benefactions (see [Chapter 15](#)).

Augustus the games-master

Augustus used an expanded repertoire of games and festivals to distribute largesse in the form of food and entertainment, and to dictate and demonstrate proper behavior for citizens (and for emperors) as spectators and patrons at spectacles. He firmly controlled and supervised practices, especially violent games, and he reminded future generations of his generosity in his *Res Gestae*. After his long reign there was no turning back in politics or entertainments. The Romans expected future emperors to provide games at Rome, and the association between spectacles, the imperial regime, the emperor cult, and Roman culture spread to the provinces. Rome's cultural influences went beyond law and Latin to include games and shows.

As his supposed deathbed remark suggests, Augustus knew that he had “played his part well” in the “mime of life” (Suet. *Aug.* 99.1). He understood that the Princeps was *the* public figure of Rome, both at work and at leisure. The emperor's role was to provide imperial patronage and generosity as a producer of games. His personal attendance and attentiveness, with propriety but without personal physical participation as a performer, remained central to the shows.

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Notes

- 1 Edwards (2007, 46–77) sees the meaning of gladiatorial death in the arena not as sadism or sacrifice but "as an edifying subject for display" (47) and as a particularly Roman custom that had "a distinctive symbolic resonance" (48) with notions of dying and mortality.
- 2 Similarly, Coleman (1998) says that Rome was "permeated with violence" (65), which was controlled and absorbed at arena shows, and that "... the human psyche appears susceptible to the thrill of vicarious pain" (74).
- 3 Lucil. 4.2.172–5, frag. 150, from Nonius 393.30; trans. Warmington (1957, 56–7).
- 4 Good discussions include: Gabucci (2001), Jacobelli (2003, 39–106), Dunkle (2008, 30–65), and Potter (2010, 303–23, 2012, 258–77).
- 5 E.g., Suet. *Iul.* 10.2, 26.2, 39, Plut. *Caes.* 5.4, Dio 43.22–3, App. *B Civ.* 2.102, and Plin. *HN* 8.7.22.
- 6 On the Romans' interest in strange and deformed creatures, see Barton (1993, 47–81).
- 7 Tidman (1980–1981); Lämmer (1986–1987); Pavlogiannis et al. (2009).
- 8 On Augustus' support of Greek sport in Italy and abroad, including Agrippa's likely attendance and benefactions at Olympia, Spawforth (2007, 383–90), concludes (390): "Augustus, followed by Nero and Domitian, can be said to have transformed Greek agonistics into Graeco-Roman agonistics."
- 9 Cf. the attempt by Ptolemy IV to make Alexandrian Jews worship Dionysos, noted in Chapter 13.

- 10 On Herod's relationship with Augustus, his Romanization, and his building program, see essays in Jacobson and Kokkinos, eds. (2009), White (2005), and MacLean (2014, 585–7).
- 11 Glazewski (1972); Briggs (1975); Willcock (1988); Dunkle (1995).

Spectacle, Sport, and the Roman Empire

*Ever since the time their votes were a drug on the market
The people don't give a damn anymore. Once they bestowed
Legions, the symbols of power, all things, but now they are cautious,
Playing it safe, and now there are only two things that they ask for,
Bread and the games (panem et circenses).*

Juvenal 10.78–81, trans. R. Humphries

A favorite of moralists, Juvenal's famous quote criticizes the people of Rome for surrendering their freedom and accepting autocracy in exchange for state-supported shows and free food. Fronto (*Princ. Hist.* 17), however, praising Emperor Trajan for recognizing the realities of emperors, wrote that free grain and shows were essential for keeping the support of the people, and, that while not all Romans were on the grain dole, spectacles "pleased everyone." Spectacles were a fact of life in the cities of the Roman Empire; they helped structure Roman society and define what it meant to be Roman.

From the emperors who took pride in the productions, to the spectators, noble, and lowly, who flocked to the shows, Romans of all classes attended and enjoyed the games. For the state, the provision of great spectacles symbolized power, leadership, and empire. Romans found something redeeming or entertaining about the games: the allure of violence, the exotic and erotic sights, the skill and courage of participants, or the ability to interact with the emperor. Ovid (*Ars am.* 1.164–70, 3.395–8) recommends gladiatorial shows as well as the circus as places of amatory opportunity. Some Stoic or elitist authors criticized the excess and waste, and the irrational passion of spectators, but like Greek critics, they were a minority ineffectually condemning what was prevalent and popular.

Attentive and knowledgeable, many spectators, including some emperors, were true fans, or even fanatics; some perhaps were sadists, some went for the crowd and the gambling as well as the violence, and many went simply to escape their deplorable living conditions. Indeed, as social functions, spectacles were occasions, as the Christian author Tertullian (*De spect.* 25) said, for "seeing and being seen," for seeing exciting performances, and for being seen—as producers and patrons of games sitting at prominent vantage points, as citizens of status in seats of privilege, and as citizen-spectators

participating and sanctioning the rules and rulers of Rome.

An entertainment industry

From rustic cults and revelry to imperial extravagance, Roman spectacles grew with the city and its empire. The number of days of state-funded games within the 159 festival days per year in the early Empire grew from 65 under Augustus to 93 under Claudius; under Marcus Aurelius the number was 135 of 230 (Balsdon 1969, 245–8; Carcopino 1975, 203–6). Many of the days had theatrical shows, mainly mimes and pantomimes, but moderns are more fascinated with Rome’s chariot races, gladiatorial combats, and beast fights.

From the Circus Maximus to the Colosseum, spectacles of the Empire largely were expanded and embellished versions of earlier performances under the Republic (triumphs, *ludi*, and *munera*) adapted even more for the comfort and entertainment of the spectators. Rome approached mass entertainment with the same talent for organization, imperial resources, and notions of social hierarchy and order that characterized other aspects of Roman civilization. Studies (e.g., Potter 2010, 348–9) appropriately speak of Rome’s “entertainment industry,” with stars, fans, and blockbuster shows.¹ The elite feared and resisted the elevation of entertainers; but, forced to fund shows, they recognized the value of low status but glamorous and politically valuable stars. With energy and pride, Rome scoured the empire for victims, built monumental facilities, orchestrated events, and immortalized the performances in literature, art, and architecture.

The development of spectacular facilities indicates Rome’s concern for spectators—their access, sight lines, security, comforts, and above all their entertainment.² With capacities of c. 150,000 at the Circus Maximus and c. 50,000 at the Colosseum, mass entertainment was a vital part of Rome’s city life. Moreover, distinctively Roman shows and their facilities, as compelling, concrete symbols of power and ideology, spread to Italy and to provincial centers from Carthage to Constantinople. A city of over a million people, Rome held together an empire of c. 40–60 million not only by military, political, and legal powers, but also by the unifying force of Roman culture, with games and shows as vital elements.

Emperors, Spectacles, and Scandals

As noted ([Chapter 14](#)), Augustus set the proper model of generosity, composure, and control for later emperors: graciously provide the people of Rome’s cosmopolitan empire with a variety of spectacles and sports appealing to the traditions of Rome, Greece, and the Near East, and attend and be attentive but do not interfere in the contests or offend the spectators. On display at spectacles, the emperor was the most prominent spectator in his special box in the stands at the amphitheater and circus. The assembled

crowd, feeling safe in their mass anonymity, used the opportunity to view the emperor, comment on his rule, and make appeals to him. Wise emperors, understanding the dynamics of political theater, knew that their performance, gestures, and gifts were all part of playing the game of emperorship. They had absolute power, but they still were expected to act with decorum and magnanimity; they should not diminish the dignity and grandeur of the emperorship by personally performing in shows. Emperors were to be credible fathers of the country, strong military leaders, rulers of the world, and worthy candidates for deification and veneration in the emperor cult.

Sensationalistic and elitist sources (e.g., Suetonius, Dio Cassius, the *Augustan History*) used accounts of games as reflections of an emperor's character and reign (Newbold 1975; Bradley 1981). Some notorious emperors—unstable, paranoid, or megalomaniacal—misread or ignored the rules and misbehaved at the games. Caligula (37–41 CE), of course, gets indicted on several counts (Beacham 1999, 168–86). Unlike the reclusive Tiberius (14–37), the young, irresponsible spendthrift showered the people with lavish games. He trained and performed as a Thracian gladiator, a charioteer, a singer, and a dancer, although not as publicly as Nero did later. Like Nero (see page 317 below) he staged a ludicrous triumph for himself (for a nonconquest of England). Like Domitian (81–96), Caligula interfered in chariot races as a rabid fan of the Greens (Suet. *Calig.* 55.2–3). Once when the circus crowd petitioned him for tax relief, the irritable emperor had protesters arrested and killed; the crowd became silent to save their lives (Joseph. *AJ* 19.24.7). His abuse of spectators in the stands, forcing them into the arena to fight as gladiators or exposing them to beasts, helped bring on his assassination.

Emperor Marcus Aurelius (161–180) dutifully accepted his obligation to provide and attend shows, even though his intellectual inclinations made him less than a fan, but his son Commodus, a self-styled Herakles (see [Figure 15.1](#)), actually performed in games as a beast hunter and gladiator (Kyle 1998, 224–8; cf. Hekster 2002). A dilettante hunter who did not endanger himself, Commodus supposedly killed thousands of beasts in shows. He slew a hundred bears by spearing them from a gallery built for him above the arena, and he shot various beasts from a distance with bow and arrow. Herodian (1.15.5) makes suspiciously pharaonic claims that Commodus decapitated ostriches in full stride with arrows with curved tips, and that he killed a hundred lions with a hundred shots. As a pseudo-gladiator, Commodus claimed to have fought 735 or even 1000 fights. Attended by the official in charge of the Praetorian Guard, he fought left-handed as a *secutor* (see below on types of gladiators) with blunted weapons, but he did not face gladiators with deadly weapons. Even when clubbing to death cripples costumed as giants or dragons, he allowed them to throw only sponges.³ He demanded a million sesterces from the public fund for each show, and he forced senators to applaud and to hail him as lord and victor. It was all too much, and it had to

end. Before his planned public appearance in gladiatorial armor to assume the consulship of 193 CE, Commodus was strangled by his athletic trainer.



Figure 15.1 Bust of Emperor Commodus (180–192 CE) as Hercules, Musei Capitolini, Rome, Italy.

© The Art Archive/Alamy.

Hollywood never tires of depicting depraved, self-indulgent, pathologically impetuous emperors, but sources present imperial abuses at games—disrespecting spectators, forcing citizens into the arena, and especially performing themselves in public—as extraordinary outrages against the

traditions and proper conduct of shows. Most emperors recognized the value of spectacles for autocracy and empire. Pliny penned an encomium (*Pan.* 33–5) on Trajan as a model emperor: he showed generosity and justice in producing inspiring spectacles with talented, equally matched combatants, and he granted freedom of expression to spectators. For half a millennium Roman emperors produced innumerable games with proficiency, professionalism, and popularity.

Days at the Track: Chariot Racing

Rome's most popular spectator sport, chariot racing was held regularly (on 66 days of the year in the fourth century CE, usually with 24 races/day), drew the biggest crowds, and persisted from early Rome into the Byzantine Empire. Like modern horse racing, Roman chariot racing had grand tracks, magnificent thoroughbreds from stud farms, excited fans, tight races, betting, and victory purses. As at modern racecar speedways, thousands of spectators assembled in a vast facility to witness speed, skills, and thrills, to see stars risk their lives in races put on by an elaborate network of personnel from officials to fast food vendors. During the Republic chariot racing developed distinctive features, such as the factions and the design of the venue, and the Empire saw even more expansion, elaboration, and parapolitical interaction at the Circus.⁴

The factions continued under the Empire as commercial organizations and as groups of fans. The emperors monopolized the arena, but the circus factions retained their private status and their influence for centuries. Perhaps the emperors were reluctant to interfere with the traditional arrangements, or they economized by renting the factions' valuable resources. In the late third century CE, however, former charioteers came to replace the equestrian businessmen who traditionally ran the factions (see [Chapter 16](#)). The change fit a broader pattern of veteran entertainers running organizations for athletes and other performers.

Devoted to their teams or colors, the factions of spectators were highly vocal about the races and about current events. Like the amphitheater, the circus was a surrogate assembly that offered the people a chance to see and—normally—interact safely with emperors.

The imperial Circus Maximus

The Circus Maximus was a fairly rudimentary facility until the Late Republic (133–31 BCE) when the basic form (*c.* 650 × 125 m) emerged under Caesar with an elongated oval track and tiered rows of seats on both sides and around the curved end (Suet. *Iul.* 39.2; Humphrey 1986, 73–7). Augustus added a platform area (*pulvinar*) in the stands that housed a shrine and a royal box. Claudius redid the formerly wooden starting gates (*carceres*) in marble, and Nero made improvements, including adding seating for the knights. Domitian

rebuild the Circus when its sides were destroyed, probably in the fire of 80 CE (Suet. *Dom.* 5). By 103 Trajan's renovation, in which he rebuilt the *pulvinar* and replaced the wooden seating with a structure of brick-faced concrete, established the canonical form in elements, decoration, and mechanics. Estimated dimensions include c. 650 × 140 m overall, with c. 580 × 79 m for the arena, which was about twelve times as big as the arena of the Colosseum (Humphrey 1986, 1). After Trajan's expansion, the capacity was c. 150,000, not the 250,000 of some modern estimates. Only the general outline of the Circus Maximus is visible today, but J. Humphrey (1986, 56–294) has reconstructed its history and operation from archaeology, literary references, and depictions in art and on coins, and from over 40 better-preserved facilities (of some 170 or more that apparently once existed). The circus at Lepcis Magna in Libya, the best example, shows how the design of the track and facility maximized fairness and visibility.

Unlike the Greek hippodrome, Rome's facility had a solid barrier down the middle of its track. That barrier is often called the *spina*, but that term was first applied to it in the sixth century CE. Humphrey argues that the proper term, used by most ancient authors, is *euripus* (channel) because the barrier (from the second century CE on) contained a series of water basins that themselves contained monuments and fountains (see [Figure 15.2](#)). The complete permanent barrier (with turning posts, walls, and decorations) developed in Trajan's circus. An ideal showplace for symbols and decorations, the barrier at the Circus Maximus held an Egyptian obelisk to the Sun dedicated by Augustus in 10 CE, altars, statues on columns, shrines, and even a large statue of Cybele riding a lion. Lap counters in the form of eggs and dolphins were lowered or tipped to mark the seven laps. On either side of the barrier, chariots raced down and back around conical turning posts (*metae*). Substantial and dangerous if struck by a chariot, each post was made of three tall cones on a semicircular base. An ancient shrine of Consus, a god of agriculture and granaries (later associated with Poseidon, the underworld, and horses), lay below the eastern post.



Figure 15.2 Relief with scene of chariot race in Circus Maximus, c. second-

Before the races began, there was a formal procession (*pompa*) of images of gods, which were placed in the *pulvinar* to view the games (Ov. *Am.* 3.2.43–58). Processions might also include officials, drivers, dancers, athletes, and musicians (Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 7.70–3). When the dignitaries had settled in their seats, chariots were assigned by lot to 12 stalls with starting gates (*carceres*, first built in the circus in 329 BCE) arranged in a slight curve facing the track and equidistant (170 m) from the first turning post. When an official dropped a white handkerchief (the *mappa*), an attendant tripped a mechanism and the wooden gates flew open simultaneously, thanks to an elaborate catapult mechanism of twisted ropes, which perhaps derived from Greek precursors and was in operation by the first century BCE. The arrangement prevented false starts and cheating, but if there were complications, officials, prompted by the crowd, could order restarts.

The chariots sprang onto the track from the stalls at the open (western) end and raced toward the other semicircular end, but they had to stay in their individual chalked lanes until they almost reached the end of the barrier. After reaching a chalked “break line,” charioteers could move into any position (Cassiod. *Var.* 3.51.7), striving to be as close as possible to the barrier and turn posts to travel the shortest route. The barrier was slightly offset or abaxial to allow a little more space for the chariots as they broke from the gates and headed for the first lane, thus ensuring that all chariots traveled the same distance and had an equal chance. Chariots ran seven laps (of c. 1500 m each) counterclockwise (because charioteers were right-handed). About half way down the right hand track was the finish line and the umpires’ box, above which was the Temple of the Sun and the Moon. On the opposite side, the imperial box housed the emperor, his family, and the images of the gods. The conspicuous association of religion and imperial rule with the finish of the race, and the prominent decorations on the barrier, led Christian authors to see the circus as a sanctuary for demons.

The Circus Maximus was not Rome’s only racetrack. The Circus Flaminius in the Campus Martius housed races from about 220 BCE but never developed permanent seating arrangements. The Circus of Gaius (Caligula) and Nero on the Vatican Hill was largely for private use by those circus-struck emperors. Smaller but well preserved, the Circus of Maxentius on the Appian Way, dedicated in 309 CE, represents the final, streamlined form. Modeled on the Circus Maximus, other monumental circuses appeared in the second century at major cities such as Antioch, Carthage, and Alexandria.⁵

While the western provinces looked to the Circus Maximus, factions, and Roman traditions, the eastern provinces traditionally looked to Greek customs, private participation, and the hippodrome (Humphrey 1986, 438–

539). Eastern equestrian interest revived in the second and third centuries CE with imperial patronage. Paradoxically, monumental structures were modeled on western circuses, but they housed Greek-style races. Humphrey suggests that the early fourth century was the most important era for circus construction, with at least five new monumental stone circuses. Constantine established the model at Constantinople, and circuses became an integral part of Byzantine imperial iconography and public relations (see [Chapter 16](#)).

Charioteers: driving Romans wild

Most charioteers were Greek or Hellenistic slaves purchased and trained by a circus faction, or freedmen hired on by one. Funerary epitaphs lament their short lives and bad luck, but talented and successful charioteers could become rich stars. They received a portion of the prize money for successes in races, and in time slaves could purchase their freedom and then negotiate for themselves as free agents. Sometimes charioteers changed factions, by their own negotiations or by being sold. The charioteer Calpurnianus competed for all four factions and won over 1100 times, probably in the first half of the second century 90 CE.⁶

Juvenal complained that a charioteer for the Red faction could be wealthier than a hundred lawyers (7.112–14), and that a jockey could make more money in one race than a teacher made in a year (7.243). Martial said Scorpis, who died at the age of *c.* 26 with 2048 wins, was the toast of the town in the late first century CE. Bemoaning his own meager earnings, Martial (10.74) grumbled that Scorpis could make 15 bags of gold for winning one race, but he also wrote an epitaph about that driver's tragic death. Another famous charioteer, Gaius Appuleius Diocles, originally from Spain, won 1462 of the 4257 races he entered during a 24-year career. He died at 42 in the mid-second century CE, and his epitaph (*CIL* 6.10048 = *ILS* 5287) carefully details the tactics used, his purses (worth a career total of 35,863,120 sesterces), and other statistics, with claims to setting records.

Stirring accounts by Silius Italicus from the first century CE and by Sidonius Apollinaris from the fifth century show that the few rules in the circus allowed brutal tactics by drivers and teams of chariots. Bumping was permitted and common, and contact with the barrier or turn post could shatter chariots, which were built light for speed. Crashes could involve numerous chariots and the deaths of drivers and horses. Charioteers had leather helmets and some protective wrappings for their legs and torsos, but these gave only paltry protection. Like their Etruscan precursors, drivers tied the reins around their waists to add force by leaning back. They had knives to cut themselves free in an emergency, but they had only split seconds to save themselves from injury or death. An epitaph records that two drivers, sons of a charioteer named Polynices, died at the ages of 20 and 29 (*CIL* 6.10049 = *ILS* 5286).

Charioteers naturally were superstitious, and they or their fans resorted to black magic. In the track at Carthage and elsewhere, especially in North Africa, they buried curse tablets—small texts invoking demons to cause a rival charioteer or team to lose or to suffer grievous injury.⁷

Spectators and factions

The passionate partisanship of fans devoted to their color and its leading charioteer evoked elitist criticisms of the masses as idle, fickle, ignoble, and irrational. Pliny the Elder (*HN* 7.53.186) claims that an obsessed circus fan threw himself on the funeral pyre of a charioteer of the Reds and perished. Pliny the Younger (*Ep.* 9.6), professing amazement that thousands flocked to the races, charged that it was not the speed or skill that they loved but rather a bit of cloth (the team colors), and that if the colors were switched fans would mindlessly shift their loyalties.

Mocking the circus mania of the masses, Juvenal (11.193–204) claims that countless commoners and even “all of Rome” attended the circus. The great noise he hears means that the Greens have won, for a loss by the Greens would have brought despair comparable to the defeat at Cannae. Juvenal opines that the noise, betting, and pursuit of girls might be fine for young men, but he preferred more genteel relaxation to the mob scene at the track. Enthusiasm for the circus, however, was not limited to one class, age category, or era.⁸ In the fourth century CE, Ammianus Marcellinus (28.4.28–31) claimed the Circus was the home, the temple, the assembly, and the focus of all the passion and hopes of commoners, who felt as if the state would fall if the right charioteer did not win. Ironically, like Greek critics, Roman critics seem quite knowledgeable about the shows they supposedly disdained and avoided (Mammel 2014). Tacitus (*Dial.* 29.3) complains that Romans, almost from birth, were obsessed with the stage, gladiators, and horses rather than proper diversions, yet Tacitus himself attended the circus (Plin. *Ep.* 9.23).

Ovid shows that the circus had social attractions beyond the actual races. Some seating was reserved, but general seating, especially in the upper levels, was free and open to all. This allowed the lower classes to mix with others who shared their interests, and to see the emperor and other notables. The circus also was a place for petting and betting. Ovid (*Am.* 3.2.1–84; *Ars Am.* 1.135–63) recommends the stands as a site for romantic overtures. The narrow, crowded seating, with males and females intermixed, provided the chance to watch a desirable spectator as well as the race, and to offer courtesies in hopes of a dalliance. Like cheering, informal betting along team lines (Harris 1972, 223–6) let fans participate indirectly in the mass spectacle.

Imperial Triumphs

To curtail the popularity of generals with the legions and the people, emperors

starting from Augustus monopolized the politicized privilege of triumphs for themselves and the imperial family.⁹ The actual generals might be granted special titles and privileges called “triumphal ornaments,” or the emperors might simply take credit for the military successes of others. Claudius (41–54) was politically astute enough to present himself in a general’s costume, in effect as a *triumphator*, when he staged a mock battle reenacting the defeat of the British kings (Suet. *Claud.* 21.6). Other emperors were criticized for staging unmerited triumphs with fake prisoners of war and spoils (Suet. *Calig.* 45, 47; Tac. *Agr.* 39.1).

After collecting 1808 victory wreaths in his tour of Greece in 66–67 CE, Nero returned to Italy in 68, in his mind, in triumph.¹⁰ After entering Naples, Antium, and Albanum with white horses through a hole made in the city wall, according to the Greek custom for victors in the great games, Nero staged a ludicrously grandiose pseudo-triumphal entry into Rome (Beard 2007, 268–71). Using Augustus’ triumphal chariot, he wore a purple robe but also a Greek cloak decorated with gold stars, and he had an Olympic crown on his head and a Pythian wreath in his right hand (Suet. *Ner.* 25.1). A seething Senate soon declared him an enemy of the state: no more games for the Greekling emperor.

Soon the Flavians brought a proper military triumph. Josephus (*BJ* 7.121–157) describes the triumph of Titus and Vespasian after the fall of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. As the throng of people converged, there was barely enough space for the procession to pass. Josephus marvels at the abundance and variety of war booty, at the artworks and the rich costumes, and the moveable stages—what we might call floats—with painted scenes. Some 700 Jewish prisoners of war, selected for their physical stature, were displayed, as well as a heavy golden table and a grand menorah looted from the temple.

Josephus (*BJ* 7.153–5) adds that the news of the brutal execution of the enemy leader, Simon son of Gioras, evoked widespread expressions of joy among the crowd, and he explains that the subsequent sacrifices and feasting celebrated the army’s victory and renewed hope for future prosperity. Such callous celebration of the suffering and death of a foe is disturbing, but violence was part of the very fabric of Roman history.

Gladiators, Arenas, and Empire

Roman arenas housed gladiatorial combats and animal hunts for centuries, and ritualized and even mythologized executions were added under the Empire. As noted ([Chapter 14](#)), in the early Empire, different blood sports were regularized into a daylong format (*munera legitima*). Hunts in the morning were sometimes supplemented with executions by means of animals (*damnatio ad bestias*). Lunchtime shows (*meridiani*) might include tame diversions (e.g., athletics, dances, novelties), but protracted executions

became common. Gladiatorial combats followed in the afternoon. The combats provided militaristic entertainment, they communicated proper military *virtus* for soldiers and citizens, and they enacted *Romanitas* for non-Romans.

Only a large empire could afford and produce the great extravaganzas of the emperors, for even local shows required extensive preparation. The producer (*editor*) who organized and financed the show had to gather or contract for the gladiatorial troupe, usually through a trainer (*lanista*). At Rome imperial procurators arranged and produced shows for the emperors. The earlier privately owned gladiatorial schools (*ludi*) were banned from Rome, probably under Augustus and definitely by Domitian (81–96), as emperors set up four imperial gladiatorial schools (*Ludus Magnus*, *Dacius*, *Matutinus*, *Gallicus*), each with a small training arena and facilities for housing gladiators.

In an exciting discovery at Carnuntum (capital of the province of Pannonia Superior), near Vienna, experts using noninvasive, multidisciplinary techniques (e.g., aerial photography, remote sensing, ground-penetrating radar) have located and virtually reconstructed a gladiatorial training school near the ancient municipal amphitheater (of c. second to third century CE) with training areas, cells for gladiators, a bath complex, and more. Some identifications (e.g., possibly a separate cemetery with gladiator burials) await further investigation, but the undisturbed below ground remains clearly surpass the excavated remains of the *Ludus Magnus* at Rome (Neubauer et al. 2014).

Gladiatorial types, equipment, and procedures were largely standardized throughout the empire from the first to fourth centuries.¹¹ Well-equipped professionals, gladiators had flashy but effective armor. The fighter's head, arms, and legs usually were well protected, but his torso, the main target, was bare, as if to symbolize his bravery. In the early imperial period, the *Murmillio* and *Secutor* replaced the heavily armed Samnite. The bare-chested *Murmillio*, with a heavily padded left leg with a short greave, wore a brimmed helmet with an angular crest in the shape of a fish. With a sword and a tall oblong shield, this "heavyweight" gladiator was often set against the *Thraex* (Thracian) or *Hoplomachus*, who shared some of the same equipment (trousers, arm guards (*manicae*), pairs of high greaves). The *Thraex* used a small rectangular shield and curved (thrusting) sword or scimitar. His helmet was like that of the *Hoplomachus* but with a curved crest and griffin. The *Hoplomachus* had a small, round shield, thrusting lance, and dagger. The *Provocator*, as during the Republic, was a middleweight with a breastplate and straight sword, who often fought another of his type. The most glamorous type, the *Retiarius* with his net, trident, and dagger, was introduced in the early imperial era.¹² His only protection was an arm guard and a shoulder guard (*galerus*) on his left side. The *Retiarius* wore no helmet and showed his face, but other gladiators under the Empire wore visored helmets. The *Secutor*

was a specialized opponent routinely set against the *Retiarius* in the second and third centuries (see [Figure 15.3](#)). He resembled the *Murmillo* except for his rounded helmet with small eyeholes and a finlike crest, so designed to avoid entanglement in the net of the *Retiarius*.



Figure 15.3 Gladiators: *retiarius* and *secutor*, Saarbrücken, Germany, second–third century CE. Scala H500912.

© Ann Ronan/Heritage Images/Scala, Florence.

Combats in the arena

Announcements of shows on walls at Pompeii detailed the date, producer, and number and type of combatants, as well as any extra features (e.g., awnings, executions). On the eve of the show, gladiators received a sumptuous public meal (*cena libera*) and were put on public display (Plut. *Mor.* 1099b). Shows began with a procession of gladiators, beasts, and condemned convicts, with placards (*tituli*) identifying fighters, victims, and the producer. The popular notion of the gladiatorial salute, “Emperor, we who are about to die salute you,” is ill founded. Gladiators may well have hailed the emperor, but that

famous phrase comes not from gladiators in an amphitheater but from doomed combatants in a *naumachia* staged by Claudius (Suet. *Claud.* 21.6; cf. Dio 60.33).

Pseudo-Quintilian's fictional account (*Decl. Mai.* 9; *The Case of the Ransomed Gladiator*) relates preparations in the arena. Weapons were sharpened and inspected, and braziers heated pokers to be used, like whips, to motivate fighters and to check that fallen fighters were indeed dead. The combatants often were paired by contrasting and therefore complementary styles. True gladiators fought duels, one pair at a time, not mass fights. Group fights (*gregatim*) recreating battles were known, but they used the poorest combatants, probably condemned, nonprofessionals barely worthy of being called gladiators.

The modern media prefers over-the-top depictions of gladiatorial gore, but gladiatorial combat was not indiscriminate slaughter, not some bizarre and berserk mass *mêlée* in which chaos reigned and death abounded. Such misconceptions stem from Seneca's account of what explicitly was a mass execution staged as a combat during a midday show (see page 313). Disturbing images in mosaics of what appear to be arenas littered with corpses and carcasses, while other fights and hunts continue about them, represent a sequence of hunts, executions, and combats over the course of the day. The message of inscriptions and depictions in art is not that Romans sadistically enjoyed butchery but that generous editors put on splendid games (Brown 1992).

Instead of murderous mayhem and senseless slaughter, a gladiatorial combat was a well-orchestrated *pas de deux* controlled by two attentive referees. Eager to fight, gladiators complained if they were not used (Arr. *Epict.* 1.29.37), and they wanted to be matched against worthy opponents (Sen. *Prov.* 3.4). Fights were not fixed or fake. The risks of these Roman extreme sports were real, but there were rules and conventions of fair play that reduced the number of deaths (Carter 2006, 2006/2007). Not insatiable sadists "lusting for blood"—a tired and overused phrase—Romans were knowledgeable and discerning consumers of gladiatorial entertainment. They hoped to see skilled swordsmanship, bravery, and virtue, not butchery and slaughter. The death of a virtuous gladiator was a tragic misfortune, not a delightful certainty.

Fighters carried *c.* 20 kg of equipment, so combats only lasted a few (perhaps 10–15) minutes until one combatant, by injury or fatigue, was incapacitated or overly vulnerable (Potter 2010, 335–41). The attentive crowd, noting the gladiator's plight, called out *habet*: "he's done." The defeated gladiator dropped his weapon (scenes often also depict discarded shields) and raised his finger to admit defeat—the same gesture used in Greek combat sports—and to plead for a positive decision about his fate—a reprieve (*missio*) from death (i.e., discharge from the arena that day but not from combat in another show in the future). As depicted in a mosaic from Zliten in Libya (see [Figure 14.3](#)),

an official referee, wearing a white tunic with a purple stripe and carrying a staff, made sure the victor awaited the decision. The loser's fate was up to the *editor*, since his property was at stake. He probably preferred to spare as many fighters as possible for future use, but he—like the emperors themselves (Fronto *Ad M. Caes.* 1.8)—usually deferred to the spectators, who based their decision on the quality of the fight and perhaps also the fame of the fighter. Audiences scorned cheap shows with lackluster fighters (Petron. *Sat.* 45.11–12), but a series of good performances could make a brave fighter a household name.

Juvenal (3.36) satirizes producers who put on shows and kill whomever the crowd decides when they signal their will by “turning their thumbs (*verso pollice*).” Contrary to common opinion, the signal for death seems not to have been thumbs down but rather thumbs turned up toward the throat, accompanied by shouts of *iugula*—“throat” or “kill him.” The gesture for mercy or release apparently involved pressing your thumb on a closed fist or pointing two fingers away or out (Corbeill 2004, 51–66). If the decision was death, the victor executed, and the loser accepted, the quick and efficient deathblow.

In Roman terms, the defeated fighter died like a soldier on the battlefield, having retrieved a certain degree of dignity for his efforts. The idea that slaves costumed as Charun and Mercury danced about the bodies stems from confusion about rituals of execution and removal from the arena. Losers were carried out on stretchers or biers, not dragged out by hooks—another misconception. Their corpses were not dumped into mass pits (Kyle 1998, 155–70). Gladiators could join burial clubs, and friends or family members claimed the bodies and arranged funerals. While the loser was being removed, the victor, like a Greek athlete, accepted the crowd's applause, took a victory lap, and collected his rewards—normally money and a palm frond, and sometimes a laurel wreath (apparently for five wins). If he had completed three years as a slave gladiator, he also earned the wooden sword (*rudis*) symbolic of release from further fighting in the arena. Full manumission from gladiatorial service came after five years.

Unlike convicts facing execution, elite gladiators had a significant chance of survival. Estimates suggest that *c.* the first century CE, only about 10 percent of fights brought the death of one of the combatants, but that by the third century, the death rate had increased to around 50 percent (Ville 1981, 318–25). A first-century gladiator therefore was unlikely to survive more than ten fights, but the odds of a long, healthy life for the urban poor were probably worse. Gladiators usually only fought once per show, and perhaps only twice or a few times per year. Injuries were common, but gladiators were well tended by doctors, including the famous Galen, who cared for gladiators in Pergamum. Since inscriptions often list multiple draws or ties, and even losses, many fights were not to the death. An epitaph from Sicily (*ILS* 5113 =

CIL 10.7297) records that a certain Flamma died at 30 having fought 34 fights, including 21 wins, nine draws, and four defeats. Martial (5.24.7) mentions a gladiator, Hermes, who was skilled at forcing his opponents *ad digitum* without having to kill them.

Martial (*Spect.* 31) praises Titus for obeying his own law that combats must continue until a fighter raised his finger (*ad digitum posita*). He describes a combat in which the fighters Priscus and Verus fought evenly without surrendering, and the crowd called for the release of both. When both fighters surrendered, Titus generously declared them both victors and released them from further service to the *ludus* (Coleman 2006, 218–34). The emperor’s clemency was probably not as rare as Martial suggests.

Producers, often priests of the imperial cult, invested time and training in their gladiators and often sold or rented them, so fighters were not to be wasted, unless for effect. An inscription of 249 CE (*CIL* 10.6012 = *ILS* 5062) from Minturnae records a show with 11 bouts in which 11 gladiators died, as if the *editor* was unusually generous. Owners used a form of insurance policy against the wasteful death of valuable gladiators: in rental contracts of the second century CE, the charge for gladiators was 80 sesterces if they survived uninjured, but clauses stipulated extra payments of 4000 sesterces if they were killed or maimed (Gaius *Inst.* 3.146). Gladiators were so costly and precious that Marcus Aurelius and Commodus decreed maximum prices and expenditures for various levels of games in an effort to lessen the financial pressure on producers in the provinces. An inscription of c. 177 CE lists prices of combatants, ranging from 3000 to 15,000 sesterces (c. 10 CE a Roman soldier earned c. 12,000 sesterces a year), and it also indicates overall costs for different types of spectacles.¹³

Gladiator bones and burials

Recent discoveries in the Greek East and Great Britain reveal much about gladiators’ lives and combats. Second-century CE gladiator burials were found at Ephesos (Kanz and Grossschmidt 2006, 2009), a Greek city that was home to both gladiatorial spectacles and aspiring Greek athletes (Brunet 2003). Analysis of the bones of 68 skeletons of mostly robust 20–30-year-old males revealed the gladiators’ living conditions, largely vegetarian diet, injuries, and prospects of survival. That there were few multiple injuries indicates that paired opponents fought face-to-face combats without excess hacking and bludgeoning. Healed skull injuries confirm that combats were not necessarily “to the death.” Some gladiators were spared, medical care aided the recovery of some, and some later fought again and died. Defeated and not released fighters accepted a deathblow to the heart via the neck or shoulder blade. Mortally wounded fighters were finished off with a hammer blow to the skull. The combats were undeniably dangerous, but the burials suggest rites and respect; gravestones bore reliefs and epitaphs of proud gladiators.

Another gladiator graveyard was discovered, this one of the first to fourth century CE, at York (Roman Eboracum). It yielded 80 skeletons of robust men, mostly of above average height, but mostly violently decapitated. Some burials involved ritual meat meals, but no epitaphs were found. Intriguing elements include the burial of skeletons with their skulls anatomically displaced, possibly as a regional ritual variation, a carnivore bite mark on one skull, and the asymmetry of arm lengths from sword training (York Archaeological Trust, 2011).

These graveyards confirm the “ambivalent” status of gladiators. Although stigmatized, they normally were not doomed to fight “to the death,” and, if killed, they could receive decent or even honorific burials with memorialization.

Volunteers, dilettantes, females, and eros

Much interest has centered on volunteer or dilettante gladiators and female gladiators. Veteran freedmen gladiators often contracted themselves out as *auctorati*, free agent or hired gladiators, who temporarily surrendered their freedom for profit or to prolong their career. Funded by Augustus and Livia, Tiberius once paid some retired gladiators 100,000 sesterces each to appear in shows (Suet. *Tib.* 7.1). Free Romans citizens, however, were not supposed to fight as contract gladiators. Persons of status (of the equestrian or senatorial orders) might enter the arena on an unpaid basis, to display military prowess or to fulfill an oath for an emperor’s health, without the stigma of *infamia* attached to entering a contract (*auctoramentum*) for financial gain. The few free citizens who contracted themselves out as gladiators, out of debt or obsession with the arena, receive excess attention from moralistic sources.

Enactments in 46, 38, and 22 BCE repeatedly but ineffectively prohibited participation by the elite as contract gladiators. A senatorial edict of 19 CE (under Tiberius) on a bronze tablet found on a bronze from Larinum says that the Senate prohibited relatives of knights and senators from appearing on stage or in the arena because such acts were “contrary to the dignity” of those orders.¹⁴ Lest the social order be threatened, the elite were not to hire themselves out, nor was anyone to hire them, for the arena. Nevertheless, the elite continued to turn up in the arena. A senator under Marcus Aurelius (161–180) remarked (SHA *Marc.* 12.3) that many praetors had fought in the arena. Some notorious emperors, including Caligula, Nero, and Commodus, allowed or even forced decent men to fight.

Tertullian (*De spect.* 22), convinced that all spectacles reeked of lust and the forbidden, claimed that women gave their bodies to gladiators and other performers. Not to be overlooked or overemphasized, the erotic appeal of gladiators, like that of modern boxers and matadors, was related to the inherent psychosexual allure of violence.¹⁵ References to gladiators as sex

symbols, however, come mostly from Ovid, Juvenal, and Martial, as well as graffiti at Pompeii.¹⁶ Juvenal claims that gladiators were attractive even to noble women, but too much has been made of his feigned indignation (6.82–113) that the noble woman Eppia went off with the scarred gladiator Sergius, and of a woman's skeleton found in the gladiatorial barracks at Pompeii. She probably was seeking shelter from the eruption of Vesuvius. Romans became upset if good women fraternized with gladiators, but liaisons were not commonplace, nor were female fighters.

Female gladiators existed but mostly in association with the games of Nero and Domitian (Brunet 2014). Nero made Ethiopian women (and children, Dio 62.3.1) hunt in the arena, and Domitian had women fight at night by torchlight (Suet. *Dom.* 4.1). Juvenal satirizes a woman for training in gladiatorial armor (*Sat.* 6.246–67), and he (1.22–3) also scornfully mentions bare-breasted women fighting wild boars in games; but Martial flatters Titus for presenting female fighters (*Spect.* 7) and a woman who killed a lion in his inaugural games at the Colosseum (*Spect.* 8). A first- or second-century CE relief from Halicarnassus (see [Figure 15.4](#)) commemorates the release of two female gladiators, named Amazon and Achillia (Coleman 2000b).¹⁷ Female gladiators were well-trained performers who fought other females or beasts but not against dwarfs, as often assumed (Brunet 2014). While rare, female combats were serious matters of skill and not just perverse parodies.¹⁸

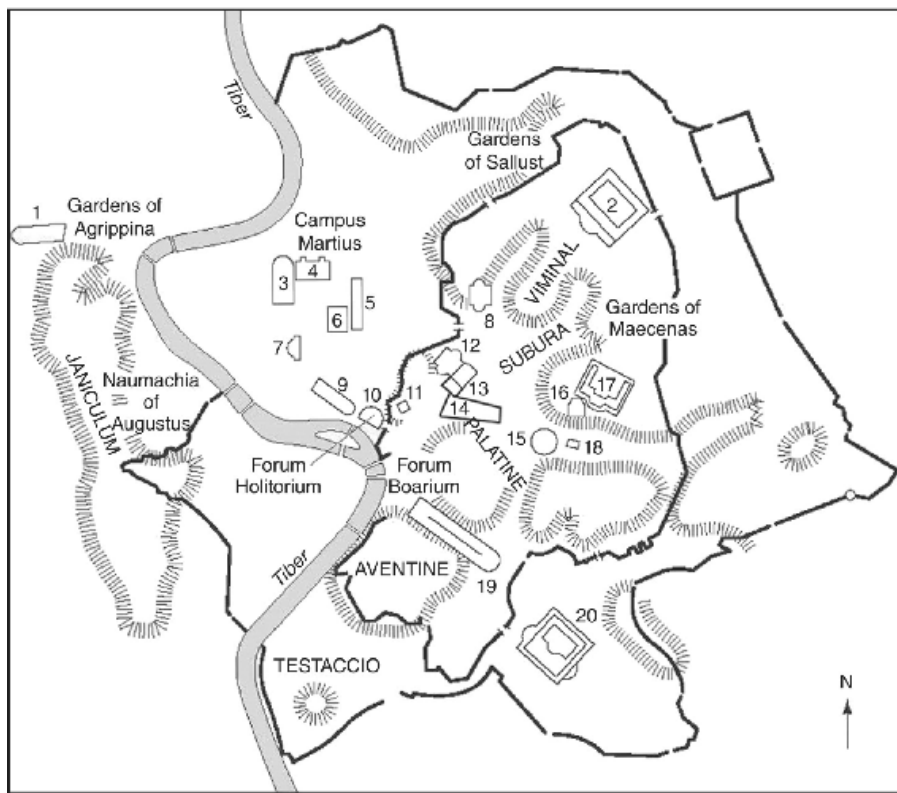


Figure 15.4 Relief of female gladiators: Amazon and Achillia, from Halicarnassus.

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The Colosseum: a purpose-built amphitheater

Roman gladiatorial and beast shows took place in Forums, the Circus, and the Saepa Julia (see [Map 15.1](#)) long before the design and construction of a specialized, monumental facility to house performances of violent men and wild beasts.¹⁹ In the debate over the invention of the amphitheater, some credit its introduction to Campania, an area associated with early funeral games, later gladiatorial training schools, and local amphitheaters. The earliest known amphitheater, built in that area at Pompeii *c.* 70 BCE (see [Figure 14.1](#)), was a simple structure with a hollow oval arena surrounded by banks of earth for seating. The dedicatory inscription (*CIL* 10.852) called it a “spectacle” (*spectaculum*); the term *amphitheatrum* became prevalent later in the age of Augustus (*RG* 22). Rejecting a Campanian origin, Welch (2007, 30–71) argues that the proto-amphitheater form, an elliptical arena with seating on all sides, especially if complete with subchambers, emerged first in the Roman Forum.²⁰ She suggests that Pompeii’s amphitheater was made specifically for Sulla’s military colonists, and that the idea was taken from Rome to achieve freestanding monumental form at Pompeii (Welch 2007, 30–71). Ironically, Rome probably borrowed the custom of gladiatorial combat from Campania, Romanized its ideology and operation, developed the form of the facility, and then sent the whole system back to Campania.



1 Circus of Gaius (Caligula) and Nero; 2 Baths of Diocletian; 3 Stadium of Domitian; 4 Baths of Nero; 5 Saepta Julia; 6 Baths of Agrippa; 7 Theater of Pompey; 8 Baths of Constantine; 9 Circus Flaminius; 10 Theater of Marcellus; 11 Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus; 12 Forum of Trajan; 13 Forums of Augustus and Caesar; 14 Forum Romanum; 15 Flavian Amphitheater (Colosseum); 16 Baths of Titus; 17 Baths of Trajan; 18 Ludus Magnus; 19 Circus Maximus; 20 Baths of Caracalla

Map 15.1 Imperial Rome.

As noted ([Chapter 14](#)), Rome's first stone amphitheater was a benefaction from Augustus' associate, Statilius Taurus (Welch 2007, 108–27). That Dio (79.25.2–4) applies the same term, “hunting theater,” to Taurus' facility, to that of Caesar in the Forum, and to the Colosseum may suggest that the logistical problems of staging beast fights were at least as important as the requirements for gladiatorial combat. True gladiators were thoroughly conditioned, and hopes of survival motivated them to behave, so even a modest arena sufficed. Wild beasts, however, had to be managed carefully for the sake of the show and the security of the spectators. Accordingly, amphitheaters provided room for the cages, ramps, nets, and other elements needed for safety and stagecraft at beast shows.

After the amphitheater of Taurus was destroyed, Nero built a wooden version in 57 CE in the Campus Martius near the Saepta Julia (Suet. *Ner.* 12.1; see [Map 15.1](#)). Also in 57, perhaps to focus attention on his facility, he ordered a temporary ban on non-imperial gladiatorial, beast, or other shows in the provinces (Tac. *An.* 13.31.4–5). Calpurnius Siculus (*Ecl.* 7.23–4) describes a

shepherd visiting Nero's amphitheater and marveling at the exotic beasts (e.g., seals, hippos), props, and stage effects in the shows. The arena could be flooded, and Nero gave one or possibly two *naumachiae*, but this venue too was destroyed.

The Flavian Amphitheater was later known as the Colosseum because a colossal (37 m high) statue of Nero (as the sun god Sol) stood nearby. When the Flavian dynasty came to power in 69 CE, they constructed this purpose-built facility, monumental and in stone, as a gift to the people. Locating it strategically on the site of Nero's lake, within the grounds of his palatial Golden House complex, the Flavians declared that they were restoring order by giving the site back to the people to house entertainments for them. Begun by Vespasian, the construction continued under Titus (79–81), and the amphitheater arose in a mere eight to ten years (see [Figure 15.5](#)). A structure of c. 188 by 156 m, 50, in height, surrounding an arena 86 by 54 m, the edifice has dominated the historical imagery of Rome ever since.



Figure 15.5 Aerial View of the Colosseum, Rome, 80 CE, Rome, Italy.

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As Dio recounts (66.25.1–5; cf. Suet. *Tit.* 7.3), Titus dedicated the (nearly complete) structure in 80 CE with a hundred days of extravagant spectacles. Some 9000 animals were killed, and there were infantry battles, mock naval battles, gladiatorial combats, beast hunts, and a horse race.

A contemporary observer, Martial penned his *On the Spectacles* (*Liber*

spectaculorum) to praise and please the Flavians.²¹ He claims that the Colosseum surpasses earlier wonders of antiquity and that members of every race assembled to acclaim the emperor as father of the country and master of the world. With mythological analogies, Martial praises the skilled hunter Carphorus as a veritable Herakles who kills 20 beasts (Mart. *Spect.* 32; Coleman 2006, 140–7). Wild animals (e.g., lions, tigers, bears, and a rhinoceros) fight and pursue each other. Titus is said to control the very nature of beasts—to make them act contrary to their instincts, to be obedient, and to beg for his mercy. The arena perhaps lacked substructures at this point, but spectators still beheld technical marvels of stagecraft—bulls lifted in the air and artificial woods complete with animals. Martial also applauds the other entertainments, including gladiators, mythologized executions, and a staged naval battles (*naumachiae*, Mart. *Spect.* 34; Coleman 1993, 2006, 249–59).²² The message of the inaugural games at the Colosseum was obvious: the generous provision of wonders for the people and the demonstration of the power of the just and godly emperor in upholding social, natural, and imperial order. Like Augustus, in construction and generosity, the Flavians set a standard for later emperors.

The Colosseum was a showplace and a place of control. Like the Circus, the amphitheater provided optimum visibility and exciting entertainment, but the shows and spectators were to be orderly.²³ A metaphor for Rome's hierarchical society, the seating areas included four tiered levels. The podium, a high platform directly above the arena, had special seats for the emperor, priests, Vestal Virgins, and senators. The imperial box and the box of the Urban Prefect were centrally located on the ends of the axis of the arena. The level above was assigned to knights, the next to normal citizens, and the highest level was for women and slaves.²⁴

Perhaps 50,000 spectators entered through 76 numbered arcades. The free tickets indicated which entrance to use, and spectators followed arcades, staircases, and tunnel exits to the proper seating area. Viewers were kept safe from the beasts by a series of devices, including nets and rollers. Contingents of troops, probably from the Praetorian Guard, formed a security force. Spectators were provided with fountains and lavatories, and there might be sprays of perfume to refresh them and keep down the stench of the arena (Scobie 1988, 209–15, 221–4). Emperors might arrange distributions of gifts and food, often by lotteries or tokens (*missilia*) thrown to the crowd or dropped from above, adding further entertainment and crowd involvement (see pages 311–12 later). A contingent of sailors could spread an elaborate awning from masts at the top level to provide shade, but apparently Caligula sometimes denied the crowd such relief from the hot sun (Suet. *Calig.* 26.5).

Added or enlarged by Titus' brother Domitian (81–96), subchambers (7.6 m deep) on two levels under the arena's wooden and sanded floor allowed beasts and fighters to emerge suddenly from trap doors in the arena. With cages for

animals, lifts, ramps, drains, and space for storing equipment, scenery, scaffolding, weapons, and armor, the chambers were preparation areas that allowed shows to become even more spectacular with artificial hills, forests, and pools.

The stagecraft required meticulous organization and a large, specialized workforce from officials in the arena to beast handlers, engineers, armorers, and laborers. Musicians played trumpets and water organs, and slaves costumed as psychopompic and chthonic gods (Mercury, Dis Pater) verified the death of executed victims. Both staff and performers worked diligently and expeditiously to please the producer, usually the emperor or his delegate, with an entertaining, memorable demonstration of power, resources, and generosity (*liberalitas*). With the parsimonious Tiberius as an unpopular exception, emperors spared no expense in trying to surpass earlier shows with novelties and visual wonders. Failures were not tolerated well. Casting Claudius as a sadist, Suetonius (*Claud.* 34.2) says he forced arena workers into combats if their work disappointed him. Sensitive to embarrassment, Claudius probably acted out of frustration because emperors were not to fail in putting on shows.

Amphitheaters and adaptations beyond Rome

The Colosseum inspired grand provincial amphitheaters in Tunisia at El Djem, in France at Arles, in Spain at Mérida (see [Figure 14.2](#)), and elsewhere, but there were fewer amphitheaters in the Greek East. K. Welch (1999, 2009, 163–85) reads such performance venues as culturally symbolic documents that reflect the spread of, and resistance to, Roman gladiatorial games. For example, when settlers in Caesar's colony at Corinth built an amphitheater, it was disdained in traditional circles at Athens. Athens inspired other Greek cities by converting its Theater of Dionysos into an amphitheater of sorts with a parapet wall and net system. Greeks preferred to adapt and preserve their traditional form, the theater, because the uniquely Roman structure, the amphitheater, symbolized Roman power. Yet in time, the Greek east adapted to Roman rule and supported arena shows, sometimes lowering orchestras in theaters or closing off the ends of stadiums to house beast or gladiatorial combats. With more compatible traditions of violent armed performances, areas of the northern provinces built amphitheaters or combined facilities, including theater-amphitheaters in Gaul. Understandably, North Africa provides abundant evidence of violent beast hunts (see page 31 later).²⁵

Whatever the adaptation, there were arena games, some sort of facilities, and audiences throughout the empire. Military interests and the obligation on priests of the emperor cult to hold annual shows were factors, but clearly many local patrons and spectators found Roman games acceptable. As L. Robert (1971) demonstrated, the Greeks in the east came to accept and support gladiatorial combats in the imperial era. Moreover, gladiatorial

combat in the Greek East adopted the iconography (wreaths, palms) and terminology (*monomachoi*, *agones*, *athla*) of boxers and heavy athletes, and the same elite class in provincial society put on both types of games.

Entrenched modern resistance to accepting sport and spectacle as compatible has lasted for decades, but studies increasingly treat gladiators under the rubric of sport. For example, M. Golden compares the ideology, iconography, risks, and rewards of gladiators and Greek combat athletes: both were talented performers who fought according to rules in competitions with unpredictable results. As gladiatorial combats spread eastward, spectators saw athletes and gladiators as similar types of fighters, and gladiators associated themselves with athletic values (e.g., *ponos*, *arete*).²⁶ As M. Carter (2014, 628) says: “The ideology of both athletes and gladiators was rooted in the same martial principles In many ways gladiators were athletes par excellence.”

Beast Hunts: Nature and Empire

Associated mostly with triumphs and the circus in the Republic, beast shows or hunts (*venationes*) were increasingly associated with gladiatorial shows (*munera*), imperial supervision, and amphitheaters in the Empire. A great variety of animals from elephants to ostriches died in shows. Numbers escalated as emperors staged lavish shows to bolster their legitimacy and popularity. One of the “good” emperors, Trajan had 11,000 beasts killed over 123 days in his Dacian triumph in 108–109 CE. While great quadrennial games at Olympia and Athens sacrificed 100 cattle per festival, Trajan’s games used up c. 90 beasts per day for many days. Pragmatic and demanding, Romans saw animals from the provinces and frontiers as commodities that emperors should supply for their amusement. The display, control, and killing of grand and exotic beasts in the arena provided entertaining and reassuring demonstrations of Rome’s territorial extent and imperial might.

The goal always was to put on a thrilling but safe show. Sometimes trained hunters pursued wild prey in the arena, using specialized weapons and equipment and often assisted by hounds. North African mosaics depict associations or “families” of professional hunters (*venatores*) who provided both hunters and animals. A third-century example from Smirat in Tunisia commemorates the expenditure of the emperor Magerius with depictions of leopards, hunters (of the venatorial family of the *Telegenii*), and bags of money (see [Figure 15.6](#)).²⁷



Figure 15.6 “Magerius Mosaic” with scenes of *venatio* with leopards, third century CE from Smirat, Sousse Archaeological Museum.

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Sometimes odd pairings of beasts that would not naturally confront each other, such as a bull and a bear, or an elephant and a rhinoceros, were forced to fight each other by whips or firebrands, or by being chained together. Large cats (e.g., lions, tigers, and leopards), elephants, bears, and bulls were popular performers, and camels, giraffes, rhinoceroses, and crocodiles also appeared. The brutal hunts in Roman art shock moderns, but Romans found them a source of wonder and pride.

The traffic in beasts

Although gladiators get more modern attention, for economic more than moral reasons, *venationes* were far more common than gladiatorial combats, and the greatest number of victims killed in arenas were animals. Some of the beasts were small and native to Italy (e.g., rabbits, goats), but most animals brought to the arena were foreign and wild—the more exotic and impressive the better. Rome classified beasts by ferocity and fodder: as wild (*ferae*) or domesticated, carnivores (*dentatae*) or herbivores. Expert handlers and veterinarians attended to the health and readiness of expensive animals. Beasts in cages were brought from the corners of the empire by wagons, rafts, and ships to Rome’s docks, but Rome’s *vivarium* or stockyard for arena animals was only a temporary holding area (Epplett 2003). Costly to keep, most beasts soon ended up in the arena. Driven from cages in the basement,

beasts were lifted up to the arena and thrust before loud and excited crowds. Some were trained, but most fought, fled, or attacked out of instinct or terror.

Rome constantly needed more beasts, and the importance attached to catching them in the wild presented numerous dangers and challenges. From mosaics in North Africa to those of Piazza Armerina in Sicily (e.g., the Great Hunt depicting the capture and transport of beasts), abundant evidence reveals the private and imperial arrangements for the hunting and transport of beasts.²⁸ A system of equestrian imperial procurators supervised vast supply networks of hunters (sometimes soldiers; Epplett 2001), beast-handlers, shippers, entrepreneurs, and bureaucrats, from the Baltic Sea to Africa and Asia (MacKinnon 2006; Epplett 2014a, 512–13). The hunts provided jobs and rid areas of dangerous animals, but the ecological impact was negative, including the extirpation of species and changes in patterns of fauna, especially in North Africa (e.g., midget elephants disappeared and hippos withdrew to the interior; Bomgardner 1992).

Games and game

Romans saw beast shows fundamentally as hunts, not sacrifices. The animals were “game” rather than domesticated sacrificial victims. Hunts lacked the normal sacrificial sequence—the cutting of willing, flawless victims’ throats. Also, arena hunts were held in the morning as the traditional time for hunting. The elements of the chase (e.g., dogs, spears, and hunters), the resistance of wild beasts, and the use of sylvan scenery all suggest spectacular recreations of hunts in the wild. The animals had little chance, but the hunts were compelling. Suetonius claims Claudius so enjoyed the hunts that he went to the arena at daybreak (*Claud.* 34.2).

The perception of beast shows as hunts is shown by the practice of distributing food, especially meat, to spectators. Giving presents at spectacles, often by means of redeemable tokens scattered to the crowd, was an extension of the early tradition of public banquets at triumphs and funerals (Kajava 1998). Some emperors, notably Domitian, dispersed foodstuffs and small animals (especially birds), as well as tokens redeemable for animals (Suet. *Dom.* 4.5; Dio 67.4.4). Mass scrambling for tokens heightened crowd involvement as spectators interacted with their leaders and became players in a communal sporting drama.

Scramblings were free-for-all communal spectacles extending up into the stands (Kyle 1998, 187–94; MacKinnon 2006, 155–7). For example, the *Augustan History* (SHA *Gord. Tres* 3.5–8) says that as aedile (prior to 238 CE) Gordian I gave 12 exhibitions of beasts, one per month, with hundreds of wild animals including stags, sheep, elks, bulls, ostriches, asses, boars, antelope, and deer. At the sixth show, he gave the beasts over “to the people to be carried off (*populo rapienda*).” For his triumph in 281, Probus held a

magnificent hunt and offered thousands of ostriches, stags, and boars, as well as deer, ibexes, and wild sheep to the people. Any spectator could enter the arena and “grab whatever he wanted” (*rapuit quisque quod voluit*, SHA *Prob.* 19.2–4). Elegabalus similarly let spectators seize animals in the arena (SHA *Heliogab.* 8.3). Adapting earlier traditions of distributing meat after spectacles, these emperors allowed the people to do the hunting and distribution themselves during—and contributing to—the spectacle. Even better than throwing tokens for game to the spectators, their hunts brought the plebs down from the stands to become hunters.

Like other shared meals, feasting at festivals and spectacles meant incorporation, commensality, and communion. Emperors used hunts to help fulfill their obligation to amuse and feed their people. The plebs hated Tiberius for disliking shows, but they loved the irresponsible Caligula for his games and his distributions of meat (Joseph. *AJ* 19.1.16). Arena meat had an association with games that the grain dole lacked. The emperor gave the hunts, the beasts were wild, arena meat was fresh, and the spectators were indirectly—and sometimes directly—the hunter-killers. Beast spectacles fed the belly and excited the spirit of the Romans.

Spectacular Executions: Criminals, Beasts, and Social Order

To deter crimes and enforce laws, Rome executed criminals of low status in the arena in increasingly spectacular ways. Suffering “ultimate punishments” (*summa supplicia*), including exposure to wild beasts, crucifixion, and being burned alive, the victims’ agonies and deaths provided a terrifying and exemplary public spectacle (Potter 1996; Epplett 2014b). The torture and aggravated death of criminals (*damnati, noxii*) became a standard part of *munera* as a supplement to the noontime shows (*meridiani*). Exhibiting the imperial government’s monopolization of force, exhibitions were presented and seen as necessary, reassuring means of social vengeance against persons who had offended societal norms. In the final act, completing the spectacular punishment, the bodies of *noxii* were dragged from the arena by hooks and disposed of in ways tantamount to denial of burial and a pagan form of damnation—probably by dumping in the Tiber at Rome or in pits or gorges elsewhere (Kyle 1998, 211–41). There was no sporting element here, just certain horrible death, yet programs of spectacles often included these deadly performances.

Morning hunts symbolized Rome’s far-flung territorial control, but other shows used beasts to demonstrate Rome’s ability to punish humans. Like royal hunts and arranged combats against beasts, the use of animals in public punishments probably came to Rome through contact with Hellenistic or Carthaginian practices. Some generals used beasts in military executions

under the Republic (see [Chapter 13](#)), but under the Empire exposure to beasts (*damnatio ad bestias*) became a widespread penalty for slaves, foreign enemies, and free men guilty of heinous offences. In Apuleius (*Met.* 10.28) a judge, condemning a female poisoner to the beasts, says she deserved worse, but there was no more cruel execution.

Criminals were led into the arena almost or fully naked, with a rope or chain around their necks, and their condemnation was proclaimed. Weaponless, sometimes bound to posts or wheeled platforms, and sometimes smeared with animal blood for scent, they were exposed to ferocious beasts (see [Figure 15.7](#)). Handlers with whips and firebrands drove the disoriented beasts toward the helpless victims. Roman law and art unapologetically show that the animals were meant to tear, maul, and torment the condemned victims. The beasts might well kill them, but a special attendant, the *confector*, went about the arena slitting victims' throats to make sure they were dead, as their death sentences demanded by law. The notion that lions and other beasts ate or consumed human beings to any large degree in the arena, or that beasts were fed with human flesh from the arena, is a modern misconception based in part on Christian notions of martyrdom (see [Chapter 16](#)).



Figure 15.7 Mosaic from Zliten, Libya showing exposure of victims to beasts, third century CE. Tripoli, Archäologisches Museum.

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Noontime shows might also include mass executions staged as combats. Unlike gladiators who fought in the afternoon, these desperate, unskilled criminals were given weapons but not defensive armor. Seneca describes witnessing such a midday show (*meridianum spectaculum*, *Ep.* 7.3–5; cf. *Ep.* 95.33), leaving no doubt about the lack of artistry as the helpless victims were forced to fight and kill each other. There was no escape. Seneca accepts the violent execution of criminals as unquestionably just (*De Ira* 2.2.4), but he

comments that executions should not simply foster irrational excitement among the spectators (Wistrand 1990, 1992, 15–29). For Rome, a society not inclined to prisons and rehabilitation, staged executions, comparable to mass deaths in *naumachiae*, disposed of undesirables and sent a message to potential lawbreakers.

Executions became even more spectacular in what K. Coleman (1990) calls “fatal charades” or performative executions ending in certain death. From the use of beasts, fire, and stage devices to orchestrated bestiality, these were theatricalized performances in which humans suffered and died in costumes, settings, and ways that recalled horrific aspects of myth. In the earliest known example at Rome, probably in the late 30s BCE, Selurus, a Sicilian brigand, was placed on a model of Mount Etna that collapsed and dropped him into a cage of wild beasts (Strabo 6.273c). Most evidence for such charades concerns the reigns of Nero and Titus. For example, Laureolus, a criminal forced into the role of the tormented Prometheus of myth, was crucified and mauled to death by a bear on stage in the amphitheater in 80 CE (Mart. *Spect.* 9). As Martial remarks (*Spect.* 9.12), what had been fiction became real punishment (*quae fuerat fibula, poena fuit*). Roman spectators would be scornfully bemused by modern “reality” and “survivor” television shows.

Greek Games in the Roman Empire

Later Greek sport traditionally was viewed negatively as *under*, not constructively as *within*, the Roman Empire. Supposedly the Romans, incapable of appreciating virtuous athletics, made Greek sport decadent, professional, and even bloodier. Recent studies, however, show that the Empire, especially the eastern provinces but also Rome itself, supported an extensive athletic and agonistic system. Emperors and local urban elites generously fostered athletic festivals, facilities, and sanctuaries. Rather than suppressing and corrupting Greek sport, Rome encouraged the continuance and expansion of such local Greek cultural traditions as part of a broad process of assimilation and patronage.²⁹

Material evidence, especially mosaics and sculptures in baths, villas, and public spaces, indicates that Greek athletics were prominent in the art of the empire. Romans became increasingly open to watching—if not personally competing in—Greek contests. Bath complexes at Rome, Ostia, and in the provinces included gymnastic facilities, and Greek exercises became more appealing and convenient (Fagan 1999; Newby 2005, 45–87).

Beefy combat athletes with their hair in topknots (*cirri*) in mosaics from the Baths of Caracalla in Rome (see Newby 2005, 67–76; [Figure 15.8](#)) have been misinterpreted as vicious thugs, and works often claim that Rome made Greek combat sports more violent by adding metal spikes to boxers’ gloves (*caesti*), but Greek sport was brutal before the Romans arrived.³⁰ Most depictions of

athletes in art and inscriptions were honorific, and athletes, as free men, had a higher social status than most performers. Thousands of inscriptions, including dedications and lists of victors and patrons, prove that Greek sport was alive and thriving.



Figure 15.8 Baths of Caracalla; athletes c. 210–216 CE. Vatican, Museo Gregoriano Profano.

© Scala, Florence.

Significantly, Greek sport was not limited to Greek territories. A fourth-century CE mosaic from Gafsa (ancient Capsa in the interior of Tunisia) depicts numerous nude, topknotted athletes, attentive referees, and an extensive athletic program with pentathletes, runners at a starting gate, wrestlers, boxers, and pankratiasts (see [Figure 15.9](#)). There is even a composite footrace among runners with helmets, shields, and torches. Trumpeters and officials wear togas and crowns, and a table bears prizes, including palm fronds, crowns, and bags of money.³¹ Some of the athletes may be local North Africans,³² but aside from the topknots, they recall the athletes of earlier Greek art.



Figure 15.9 Gafsa athletic mosaic: pankratiast, prize table, and torch race, fourth century CE. Batten Zamour, Archaeological Museum of Gafsa, Tunisia.

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Greek games at Rome

Greek athletics never rivaled chariot races and blood sports for popularity at Rome, but the Romans' supposed aversion to Greek sport is largely based on intellectualist remarks in a few literary and rhetorical sources. Horace claimed that the Greeks' passion for athletics had undermined their military strength (*Epist.* 2.1.93; *Sat.* 2.2.10). Tacitus, nostalgic for the good old days of undiluted manliness and ethnic purity, warned that Greek exercises and immorality were a threat to the character of the youth and the military vigor of Rome (*Ann.* 14.20.6),³³ but critics (e.g., *Sen. Ep.* 80.2) admit that Greek contests were popular with the people. Some Roman criticisms of athletes, charioteers, and gladiators echo Greek criticisms of athletes: social values were misplaced, athletes are gluttons, honors and prizes should go to men of culture and not to the corporeal darlings of the masses. Greeks and Romans saw their preferred forms of physical entertainments as important for their cultural identities, but cosmopolitan imperial Rome accommodated both.³⁴

Augustus generally sanctioned Greek athletics outside of Rome (see [Chapter 14](#)), but Nero and Domitian provided festivals and facilities in Rome itself.

An irresponsible emperor but an enthusiastic proponent of Greek culture, Nero started performing in public as an actor, singer, and charioteer (Beacham 1999, 197–214). In 60 CE he established the first athletic festival at Rome, the Neronia, which included gymnastic and equestrian events (Suet. *Ner.* 12.3–4; Newby 2005, 28–31). He allowed the Vestal Virgins to attend, and he also forced noble Romans to compete. Offending the elite but perhaps entertaining the masses, Nero himself competed and won in contests for oratory and lyric. In 62 he tried to promote Greek sport by adding a gymnasium to his bath complex in the Campus Martius, and he even supplied olive oil for senators and knights. He also funded his own cohort of athletes (Suet. *Ner.* 45.1) including Tiberius Claudius Patrobius, an Olympic victor from Antioch. The Neronia took place a second (and last) time in 65, and Nero competed even though the Senate had offered him the victory prizes beforehand. Soon Nero moved on to compete in Greece.

From the dynasty that gave Rome the Colosseum, Domitian promoted Greek sport at Rome more successfully than Nero. In 86 CE he established the Capitoline Games to Jupiter Capitolinus.³⁵ The program included contests in Greek athletics (three footraces, hoplite race, pentathlon, three combat events), equestrian events, music, prose recitation, and a “race for maidens” (Suet. *Dom.* 4.4). Domitian also built the first permanent stadium at Rome in the Campus Martius in 86. His quadrennial games were added to the *periodos*, joining the Actian and Sebastan Games in an expanded circuit of seven games. The girls’ race and the contests in rhetoric lapsed, but the other events continued into the fourth century.

The ecumenical and enduring Olympics

Studies now challenge the assumption that Olympia suffered oppression, neglect, and corruption under the Empire.³⁶ After some difficulties in the later Hellenistic era, Olympia actually revived under Roman patronage. Perceptive Philhellenic (pro-Greek) emperors, including Augustus, Nero, and Hadrian, admired and supported the crown festivals of Greece. In 40 BCE Agrippa helped restore Olympia’s Temple of Zeus after a lightning strike. Like Philip of Macedon, Augustus began an emperor cult at Olympia by rededicating the Metroön with a statue of himself within it. Tiberius (indirectly) won the Olympic four-horse chariot race in 4 BCE and his nephew and adopted son Germanicus probably won the same event in 17 CE. Statues and inscriptions (IvO 220–1) honored them as benefactors.

The Roman presence at Olympia grew, and competitors became more cosmopolitan, but there was no pressure to Romanize the program with arena spectacles. Rome supported the traditions and prestige of the festival and embellished the sanctuary. T. Scanlon (2002, 40–63) suggests that the

development of the Olympics under Rome was necessary and that it met with little resistance from the Eleans: “It is a mistake to think of the resulting ‘ecumenical Olympics’ as a somehow debased or inferior version of the earlier festival. They were, rather, a surprisingly vigorous, new creation” (2002, 41).

The notion of Roman abuse of Olympia mainly derives from Nero’s infamous visit to Greece in 66–67 CE. Hostile sources (Suet. *Ner.* 23–5, 53; Dio 63.9.3–21.1) claim Nero made a travesty of an inappropriately delayed set of Olympic games (of 65 CE) by collecting fraudulent victories in irregular musical contests and a ten-horse chariot race introduced for his benefit. He supposedly bribed the judges with huge amounts of money, and he always won, even when he failed to complete the chariot race, but his wins were disavowed after his death. Rearranging other festivals as well, Nero collected some 1808 victories during his tour. Nero, however, has found some redemption as a self-indulgent but earnest admirer of Greek contests. The Greeks had been sending him prizes for his lyrics earlier, and Greek flattery about his musical talents prompted his visit. In Greece, the Greeks presented him with too many honors and hailed him, in Hellenistic fashion, as a benefactor (Beacham 1999, 245–9; Sinn 2000, 111–19). Hellenistic royal ideology said Emperor Nero could not fail or be defeated, but Roman morality said he should not have competed personally and physically in public games.

Competitors still came to Olympia from far and wide because an Olympic victory remained supremely honorific. As Olympia necessarily opened admission to non-Greeks and Roman citizens, fewer victories went to athletes from the old homeland, and more victors came from Asia Minor, Egypt, and Africa (Scanlon 2002, Appendix 2.1). To see this as decline is a matter of perspective. While Olympic victors increasingly came from the eastern provinces, commemoration of victories at Olympia by such victors began to decrease in the second century, just as commemoration increased within the cities of Asia Minor. Apparently Olympic victories brought more prestige if commemorated in the victor’s own city rather than at Olympia (Farrington 1997). This development coincides with the proliferation of agonistic festivals in Asia Minor as sources of civic pride and prestige.

Some incidents involving infractions by Olympians from nontraditional areas may suggest ethnic tensions (recall Aristonikos in [Chapter 12](#)). Most enthusiastic about earlier mainland Greece, Pausanias (5.21.12–8) takes notice of fines for Zanes (see [Chapter 6](#)) imposed on Egyptian combat athletes between 93 and 125 CE: one lied about why he arrived late, two were involved in bribery, and one withdrew the day before the matches.³⁷ The last of the Zanes dates to 125 ce, but this was not the last warning. Marble statues of Nemesis (or Tyche) were placed on both sides of the entrance to the stadium tunnel, possibly in the second century. Associated with the emperor’s power and venues for spectacles, Nemesis symbolized social order and

retributive justice (Hornum 1993, 49, 54, 65–66, 89–90). Rome thus consciously and conspicuously adapted and endorsed the message of the earlier Zanes.

Archaeology at Olympia, concentrating since 1987 on the Roman era, suggests that Rome assisted Olympia's longevity. South of the Leonidaion, the "South-West Building" has been excavated and tentatively identified as a "Clubhouse" for Olympic victors, providing the first evidence of an athletic guild at Olympia (Sinn 2000, 114–18). With inset arches, possibly for statues of Herakles, and with a swimming pool and a courtyard, the facility apparently was begun by Nero and completed under the Flavians. It stayed in use through the fourth century (see [Chapter 16](#)).

Olympia in fact enjoyed a renaissance in the first to third centuries, especially in the second century. Around 150 the wealthy Greek benefactor Herodes Atticus, friend of the late Hadrian, added a "Nymphaion" (an aqueduct and fountain house). It was decorated with statues of Emperor Antoninus Pius and the family of Herodes, including his wife Regilla, who was appointed priestess of Demeter Chamyne for the games of Hera. When Pausanias visited in the 170s, Olympia was architecturally at its zenith.

Athletic festivals in the Greek East

With Roman imperial patronage, an institutionalized emperor cult, and local benefactions as major factors, the agonistic dimensions of both Greek sport and Roman spectacle proved to be highly compatible and complementary (Pleket 1998, 2010, 2014). Cities in the Greek East sustained and expanded earlier athletic traditions as they and their elite citizens tried to outdo each other with more and grander festivals, inducements for envoys, and rewards and honors for illustrious athletes. Festivals were positive and prominent components in the municipal life of urban communities—in their calendar, finances, topography, and public history (e.g., monuments, inscriptions, coins).

O. van Nijf's epigraphical studies show that Greek agonistic festivals in southwest Asia Minor were vitally important to civic life and to displays of social status. Local elites and upwardly mobile individuals found athletic training and competition an appealing way to claim flattering credentials as Greeks. For example, prominent citizens of Oinoanda in Lycia were eager to claim Greekness by supporting athletic, artistic, and literary performances. The Greek roots of the local population were questionable, but the elite, often with ties to the Roman administration,³⁸ patronized Greek festivals to give themselves a legitimizing veneer of Greek culture.³⁹

Festivals also confirmed the social and political hierarchy. The elite funded festivals, had the best seats at local games, watched their sons compete, and received recognition in processions and monuments. Also, since festivals

recognized Rome and the emperor, pro-Roman elites used games to show their loyalty to Rome. As van Nijf (2001, 334) suggests, “Greek athletic festivals of the Roman period made clear what a city was about, what everybody’s place was, and what principles were underlying the social order. Games and festivals were serious play.”

Literary treatments of Greek athletics also proliferated in the “Imperial literature,” notably in works by Pausanias, Lucian, and Philostratus. J. König’s sophisticated (2005) study shows that Greek athletics flourished and continued to influence festivals and education in the Empire, and that Greek sport was a prominent and contested topic in Imperial literature, one that reveals dynamic tensions among perceptions of later Greek athletics.

Rome’s imperial administration and the emperor cult provided institutionalization and regularity for Greek games within a Greco-Roman entertainment system.⁴⁰ Attentive emperors sanctioned a great expansion of new agonistic festivals in the provincial cities of the Greek East, many of them at least partially modeled on classical festivals. The hundreds of Greek athletic festivals in Asia Minor were in three categories: private contests named after benefactors and offering cash prizes; municipal contests (*politikoi agones*) with cash prizes in various festivals; and ecumenical crown games organized by the city or province. Emperors also granted games certain statuses or epithets, such as “sacred stephanitic,” “iselastic,” “worldwide ecumenical,” or “equal” to the crown games. There were over 30 new “Olympic” games alone.⁴¹ In return, emperors were recognized with processions, sacrifices, and acclamations. Even in the uncertain times of the third century, emperors widely fostered and patronized Greek festivals, seeking legitimacy and popularity for themselves and stability for the games.

Professional Athletes: Guilds, Prizes, and Hadrian

By the second century empire-wide systems for producing spectacles and entertainments, from gladiatorial combats to theatrical performances, operated under the supervision of the emperor and in association with the imperial cult.⁴² In the Greek East, athletic and cultural (e.g., musical, theatrical) contests were carefully supervised at the highest and broadest level by the emperor and the imperial administration. Cities usually ran their own games and gymnasia, but emperors were consulted, or they stepped in if there were problems or requests for their approval of major new games that often were named after the emperor himself (Pleket 2014). Emperors supported accomplished athletes as essential professional entertainers in the Roman entertainment industry (Pleket 2010, 187–203; Potter 2010, 296–307).

Athletes in the Roman Empire

Like other performers, high-level Greek athletes found an occupation and a

means of social mobility in the Empire. Victories brought fame and wealth. Crown games still offered the greatest honor, but local games also awarded cash prizes and even gave “appearance money” to attract stars (Dio Chrys. *De Gloria* 2).

Professional athletes collected titles and kept extensive records of their victories. An early first-century CE inscription set up by the athletic guild (or synod) of Alexandrians honors Titus Flavius Archibius of Alexandria as high priest for life of the guild (*IG XIV.747*). It details his 46 victories, specifying the event and location (from Rome to Smyrna), often claiming he was “the first of mankind” to achieve such victories. A similar inscription of c. 200 CE records the career of Marcus Aurelius Asklepiades of Alexandria (*IG XIV.1102*), a pankratiast who won at Olympia in 181 CE and at numerous other games in Italy, Greece, and Asia. He retired at the age of 25 after six years of competition but returned to win a final time at the Alexandrian Olympics in 196. Like his father before him, he was Director of the Imperial Baths at Rome and Director and high priest of his guild for life.

Second- and third-century inscriptions from Ephesos allow reconstructions of the careers of some local athletes. As in Greece earlier, aspiring athletes started as youths in local festivals, compiled records of victories, gained resources from major games, advanced to the men’s category, and calculated and planned their careers. To ascend the hierarchy of games, athletes had to hire specialized and expensive personal coaches who trained them and traveled with them. For example, Photion, a boxer from Laodikeia ad Lycum near Ephesos, won games as a youth at Ephesos and elsewhere, moved on to win at the Sebasta at Naples, the Aspis at Argos, and eventually at Olympia (Brunet 2003, 221–4). Other Ephesian inscriptions bear formulaic lists of victories and claims to “firsts” and glory surpassing even the great athletes of old.⁴³

As of old, these professional athletes were well rewarded for their skills and victories, and the traditional athletic ideology of achievement and virtue persisted in this ecumenical, bureaucratic era. Elite athletes still obsessed about victory and fame and saw defeat as worse than death. The epitaph of c. third-century CE, Alexandrian boxer Agathos Daimon, a Nemean victor also known as Camelos (Camel), says that he prayed to Zeus for “victory or death” at Olympia and that he died boxing in the Olympic stadium at the age of 35 (*SEG 22.354*).

Guilds of athletes

Official athletic guilds or synods (*synodoi*) appeared in the first century BCE in the Greek East (Pleket 1973; Potter 2012, 279–86). Mark Antony wrote to the priest of an athletic guild of sacred victors at Ephesos and granted privileges to members of the guild in Asia Minor, including exemption from

military service and public duties (*PLond* 137). Such communication between leaders and guilds continued in the Empire.

Letters between Trajan and Pliny (*Ep.* 10.39, 40, 118–9) show that the emperor carefully attended to petitions from a group of athletes from Nicaea in Bithynia c. 111 CE. Trajan decided that athletes could receive their daily meal or pension (*obsonia*) only from the time of their formal entry (*eiselas*) into their city, not from the time of the win itself. Also, rewards applied only to wins in games on the current official list; they were not retroactive for earlier wins, and they ended if the relevant games were dropped from the list. Other documents show that guilds kept extensive records, including certificates of membership, requests for pensions, and correspondence with each other and with imperial administrators. Veteran victors assumed offices, and honorary inscriptions listed extensive victories over impressive careers.

Rome came to house the headquarters or clubhouse of the international guild (*synodos*) of athletes (the “Xystic Synodos of the Herakleian Athletic Winners of Sacred Games and Crowns”) near the Baths of Trajan in the second century.⁴⁴ Hadrian had agreed to the guild’s request for this in 134 (*IG XIV* 1054b), but it was not built until 143 under Antoninus Pius (*IG XIV* 1055b). Led by Directors of the Imperial Baths, the guild passed resolutions, organized processions, and honored famous athletes. Athletes could use the bathing facilities for exercise, but locating the headquarters at Rome suggests administrative centralization of Greek athletics under a chief priest of the guild.

Hadrian’s letters on athletics

Hadrian was known as a Philhellenic emperor who built gymnasia and founded crown games (e.g., Hadrianeia, Panhellenia; Boatwright 2000, 94–104), but his meticulous attention to athletics has been affirmed by a major discovery near the ancient agora at Alexandria Troas (in northwestern Turkey). Archaeologists found a complex, lengthy inscription (89 long lines) of 134 CE with three letters from Hadrian in response to petitions made to him earlier in 134 (at the Sebasta games at Naples) by representatives of the “Dionysian” guilds of athletes and actors concerning the operation of theatrical and athletic performances (Petzl and Schwertheim 2006).⁴⁵

Hadrian clearly wanted to resolve existing disputes with professional performers, to reaffirm the established rights of athletes, and to address problems with the expansion and scheduling of games. Hadrian makes firm pronouncements about the display and provision of athletic prizes, pensions, and the flogging of athletes. He also decrees a reordering of the calendar and sequence of numerous crown games over a four-year cycle.

Letter One shows that misappropriation of athletic funds was a problem. Hadrian orders that games with prizes must be held as announced; cities and

officials may not use monies intended for prizes or allowances (*syntaxies*) for victors for other purposes, such as for building construction. To prevent any shortchanging of athletic victors' prizes, the prize money must be counted out before an official, bagged, and displayed at the games (see [Figures 12.1d](#) and [15.9](#)). Immediately after winning, victors are to claim their prize (*themata*) and their crown before the spectators. Victors and allowances must be paid in cash, not in kind; prizes are to be awarded even if games are not held. Hadrian also dictates when towns must start paying athletic allowances for their "sacred" victors. Trajan had said allowances began from the time of the ceremonial processional entry, but Hadrian says they must begin when confirmation of the victory reaches the hometown.

Hadrian also clarifies the propriety of punishing athletes' infractions by whipping, but for the welfare of athletes only two whip bearers, chosen by lot, do the whipping, and only on the legs. Athletes are not to be harmed enough to hinder their ongoing careers. Victorious athletes, however, must contribute a fee (1 percent of their prizes) to financing the financial official (the *xystarchos*) who directs the management of the games, who usually was a former athletic victor (Pleket 2010, 188, 2014, 105).

Hadrian's Letter Two details a precise rescheduling of the four-year calendar of international crown athletic festivals, including those of the expanded *periodos* and numerous newer games throughout the East and Italy.⁴⁶ Starting with Olympia as the "most prestigious" athletic festival, Hadrian lists games within the structure of the contemporary *periodos* and the inter-sequencing of major festivals, old and recent, including the Panathenaia in Greece, festivals associated with emperors (e.g., the Actia, Sebasta, Capitolia, and Hadrianeia), and festivals in Asia Minor (e.g., at Ephesos, Pergamum, and Smyrna). The calendar closes with the Panhellenia (established by Hadrian at Athens) and finally (again) the Olympic games in Elis. The calendar even includes the duration of specific contests, the travel time needed for competitors to go between cities, and also "empty" periods allowing athletes to compete at local prize games.

Letter Three briefly states that, as customary, there is to be a banquet, but it should not involve any unprecedented expense for the city. It closes by reminding the *agonothetes* (games-organizer) that he may not avoid funding the banquet.

This important inscription demonstrates Hadrian's appreciation of the value and interests of talented and popular performers, and his aptitude for what is now called sports management. Commissioners of modern professional sports leagues might well learn from this ancient emperor's attentiveness to the welfare of athletes.

Assimilation and Accommodation

Finding themselves within a large, well-run empire, both Greeks and Romans accepted the stability, protection, and economic benefits, as well as the decreased autonomy, of empire and emperorship. By attending shows and accepting distributions of food and money, people sanctioned the social and political order. Games eased their accommodation and soothed their psyches, but their participation (as patrons, competitors, and fans) was more than escapism. Games linked Greek and Roman, ruler and ruled, rich and poor, and past and present. Despite critics, the entertainment system of games and patronage, the popular culture of the Romans, bonded civic communities and helped hold the empire together as more than a political and military state.

The Roman Empire's combination of sport and spectacle, from athletic competitions to beast combats, especially in association with the ecumenical emperor cult, had synergy. For example, competitive entertainments of all types permeated the life of Aphrodisias in Caria in southwestern Asia Minor (Roueché 1993). Especially under Commodus, the city had numerous contests with a wide array of events and prizes, including the quadrennial local Lysimacheia festival from 181 CE, and the international Aphrodisia Isolympia and Attalea Kapitolia. Public entertainments at Aphrodisias had ties to professional organizations, the emperor cult, and groupings of supporters. Monuments commemorated the gladiatorial troupes of the high priests, and reliefs of gladiators and beast-fighters memorialized shows celebrating the emperor cult. Athletic competitors came from the elite as well as from humbler families, and documents praised competitors for both their wins and their moral qualities. Seat inscriptions in the stadium show the enthusiastic rivalry of factions. Acclamations declare "The Fortune of the Greens triumphs" or "Bad years to the Greens." Reflecting social hierarchies and groupings, some seats were honorary but most were marked off for craft and cult associations. Organizations of young men (ephebes or *neoi*) retained the agonistic ethos of the gymnasium. They identified with the skills of performers, supported the contests, and helped orchestrate acclamations, especially of the emperor. Like other major cities, Aphrodisias supported a variety of Greco-Roman agonistic entertainments, as many and as lavishly as possible, well into the Late Empire.

Eclectic festivals, with mixed programs of athletic, equestrian, musical, and gladiatorial performances, shared fans, funds, and facilities. It was a win-win collaboration for both the elite and the masses. As in the history of American baseball or British football/soccer, new groups have entered the rosters, and new owners have increased the bureaucracy, but the games remain popular and central elements of American and British culture. Idealists might nostalgically yearn for a past golden age, but the games—the sport and the spectacle—go on.

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Notes

- 1 Coleman and Nelis-Clément (2012), with an introduction and annotated bibliography, examines the production of spectacles of all kinds, including issues of financial sponsorship, facilities, and administration.
- 2 Scobie (1988); Coleman (2000a); Rose (2005); Dodge (2010, 2014a, 2014b).
- 3 Like Wiedemann (1992, 177–9), Hekster (2002, 154–62) interprets Commodus as symbolically defeating threats and supporting civilization. She notes that Commodus was popular with the people, he had some constructive policies, and his most outrageous purported abuses were in the last two years of his reign.
- 4 Humphrey (1986) authoritatively explains the history and organization of the races, and the evolution, design, and operation of circuses throughout the empire. Nelis-Clément and Roddaz (2008) includes essays on the architecture, operation, and imagery of Roman circuses. Meijer (2010) is an accessible historical survey, and Bell (2014) is insightful.
- 5 For updates on Humphrey, see Dodge (2014b, 562–6).
- 6 Harris (1972, 198–210); Horsmann (1998); Potter (2012, 273–7). Further on charioteers and factions, see Cameron (1976).
- 7 Heintz (1998). Gager (1992), includes curse tablets (nos. 13–15) aimed at charioteers at Rome.
- 8 With an arena *c.* 77 by over 496 m, Carthage’s circus was the largest building in Roman North Africa. Factional rivalry among fans was strong, and sources (Dio Chrys. *Or.* 32.31, 40–6, 74; Philostr. *VA* 5.26) condemn the fanaticism and vulgarity of Alexandria’s circus crowds.
- 9 Beard (2007, 68–71, 296–305).
- 10 Miller (2000, 414–20) suggests that Nero thought it would be politically advantageous to parallel his agonistic wins with Augustus’ military victories.
- 11 See Junkelmann (2000, 38–67, 2008); Dunkle (2008, 94–118).
- 12 On the near nudity and sexuality of the *retiaris*, see Carter (2008).
- 13 Oliver and Palmer (1955); Carter (2003); Potter (2010, 363–71).
- 14 Levick (1983); Edmondson (1996, 104–8); Gunderson (1996, 136–42).
- 15 Following Wiedemann (1992, 38–9), Coulston (2009) says the submissive postures of defeated gladiators suggest effeminacy while the victor’s pose suggests sexual dominance.

- 16 Hopkins and Beard (2005, 81) suggest that Pompeian graffiti flattering the sexual prowess of gladiators such as Celadus and Creces were “probably written by the gladiators themselves ...”
- 17 Manas (2011) interprets a bronze statuette in Hamburg not as a female athlete with a strigil but rather as a female gladiator (a *thraex*) with a curved dagger.
- 18 Zoll (2002) sees a Roman woman’s grave found in London’s Southwark district as that of a “gladiatrix,” but the woman probably was a prostitute or gladiatorial consort (*ludia*).
- 19 See, for example, Golvin and Landes (1990, 85–153); Futrell (1997, 125–37); Bomgardner (2000); Gabucci (2001); Dodge (2014a). Welch (2007) is essential on the architectural emergence of Roman amphitheaters.
- 20 Supposedly (Plin. *HN* 36.24.116–20; cf. Plut. *Cat. Min.* 45) Scribonius Curio in 52 BCE constructed two semicircular wooden theaters at Rome that pivoted on their axes to form an amphitheater. If this marvel existed, it was a unique and impermanent arrangement.
- 21 Coleman’s now essential (2006) work, with its introduction, translation, and commentary clarifies many complex issues about the epigrams and the games, including the question (xlv–lxiv) of whether the “Caesar” of the games was Titus or Domitian.
- 22 For the location of Titus’ water shows (probably at the *stagnum* of Augustus) and the issue of the *hypogeum* of the Colosseum, see Coleman (2006, lxix–lxx).
- 23 The early riot at Pompeii’s amphitheater in 59 BCE, depicted in a fresco now in the Naples museum, was anomalous and soon punished; Tac. *Ann.* 14.17; Scobie (1988, 219–24); Jacobelli (2003, 71–3) and fig. 58. Moeller (1970) suggests the cause was not gladiatorial games but rivalry between youths (*iuvenes*) of Pompeii and Nuceria in paramilitary games.
- 24 See Rawson (1987); Gunderson (1996, 123–6); and Edmondson (1996, 84–95) on seating and status distinctions. Challenging the notion that the crowds were a proportional cross section of the people of Rome, Hopkins and Beard (2005, 106–12) calculate that the Colosseum could house only c. a fifth of the citizens at Rome, so the poorer classes were under-represented. The audience “... was more of an elite of toga-clad citizens than the rabble proletariat often imagined today” (112). Also, the elite critics of the arena were attentive spectators watching from the better seats.
- 25 Futrell (1997, 53–76); Bomgardner (2000, 121–96); Dodge (2014a, 554–6).

- 26 Golden (2008, 68–104); Carter (2010, 2014); but cf. Mann (2010).
- 27 Dunbabin (1978, 67–70); Fagan (2011, 128–32). Bomgardner (2009) suggests the show in part was a fertility sacrifice with the reduction of wild animals being beneficial for agriculture.
- 28 Gentili (1964); Dunbabin (1978, 196–212, 1999, 130–43, 200–14); Blanchard-Lemée (1996, 200–17).
- 29 Harris (1972, 44–74); Newby (2005); Spawforth (2007); Potter (2010, 296–307, 2012, 278–87); Pleket (2010).
- 30 Lee (1997) argues that the long-sleeved Greco-Roman boxing glove had a leather flap rather than metal spikes.
- 31 Khanoussi (1988); Blanchard-Lemée et al. (1996, 190–6); Newby (2005, 84–7, and plates 4a–c).
- 32 Compare the second or first century BCE terracotta “African” boxers in the British Museum (GR 1852.4–11.1, 2); Junkelmann (2000, 81, figure 91).
- 33 Cicero made some critical remarks about diet and pederasty (e.g., *Tusc.* 2.40, 4.70), but he was knowledgeable and appreciative of Greek sport; Crowther (2001).
- 34 For Greek games at Rome, see König (2005, 205–53); Newby (2005, 19–44); Lee (2014).
- 35 Caldelli (1993); Newby (2005, 31–7).
- 36 Farrington (1997); Scanlon (2002, 40–63); van Nijf (2001).
- 37 On evidence of bribery to fix a wrestling match between two youths in Egypt in 267 CE, see Rathbone (2014).
- 38 For example, L. Septimius Flavianus Flavillianus of Oinoanda, a star victor in boxing and pankration, later in life recruited soldiers for the Roman army and was honored c. 210 CE with a statue for his efforts; Milner (2011).
- 39 See van Nijf (2001, 2010, 2012); also Mitchell (1990, 1993, 217–25).
- 40 See Pleket’s essential (2010) essay on emperors and athletic festivals.
- 41 Pleket (1998, 2014); Price (1984); Harl (1987, 63–70, pls. 28–9); Farrington (1997, 32–43).
- 42 See Pleket (2010); Coleman and Nelis-Clément (2012).
- 43 Brunet (2010, 2011) shows that later athletes knew athletic history and compared their records and “firsts” to earlier athletes.

44 Pleket (1973); Sinn (1998); König (2005, 222–5); Lee (2014, 538–9).

45 Translations include Jones (2007) and Potter (2010, 352–71). Discussions include Slater (2008); Pleket (2010, 190–5); Potter (2012, 301–7).

46 See Potter (2010, 353), Table I, “Hadrian’s Festival Cycle.”

Later Sports and Spectacles: Romans, Christians, and Byzantines

For it seems to me God has made us apostles the last act in the show, like men condemned to death in the arena, a spectacle to the whole universe—to angels as well as men.

Paul, 1st Corinthians 4.9 (*Oxford Study Bible*)

In the Late Roman Empire (285–476 CE) spectacular Greco-Roman entertainments continued but declined in a changing economic and cultural world. Rome was losing the stability and grandeur of the *Pax Romana*, frontiers were crumbling, new groups—both hostile and humble—were appearing and threatening Rome and its pagan culture.

Most forms of spectacles persisted on a reduced scale in the Western Empire for many years even as the Empire became Christian. Rome could no longer afford, and Christians would not tolerate, the lavish spectacles of old. Ironically, in the Greek and Christian Byzantine Empire (395–1453 CE), with its grand capital at Constantinople, wildly popular chariot races survived for several centuries.

This chapter discusses the discourse and conflict between Christians and Romans about spectacles, the later years of Greco-Roman games, and the often-volatile Byzantine chariot races.

Christian Opposition to Pagan Spectacles

Growing within the Empire as spectacles reached their height, Christianity was a fringe or counter-culture bound to conflict with Rome's pagan traditions of sport and spectacle. A cultural clash of ideologies, faiths, and identities led to polemical criticism, animosity, and violence as Christians and Romans rejected and condemned each other's beliefs and customs. That Christianity ultimately triumphed and Rome became a Christian Empire was hardly predictable at the time—except via the apocalyptic faith of early Christians.

This section surveys Christian criticisms of Greco-Roman spectacles, and Roman reactions to Christian opposition and defiance. Obviously, killing Christians in arenas, even with costumes, animals, and stage effects, was not “sporting.” For condemned Christians who refused to recant, there was no escape in this world. For pagan spectators, however, the abuse of Christians largely overlapped with other spectacular and theatricalized executions in aims, procedures, and venues.

Non-dispassionate evidence

Evidence for early Christianity is problematic because Romans, finding Christians alien and baffling but not initially threatening, paid little literary attention to Christianity until after Nero's persecution in 64 CE. The majority of our sources, then, are internal and partisan: Christians writing Christian history.

With roots in Judaism, Christians were aware of Jewish historical problems with Greco-Roman entertainments, from resistance to athletic Hellenization in the Maccabean revolt to Herod the Great's patronage of Greek games and Roman spectacles (see [Chapter 14](#)). Such humiliations and foreign intrusions offended Jewish morality and the cultural traditions that defined their identity.¹ Christians therefore inherited opposition to, but also familiarity with, pagan entertainments. In time Christian writers applauded heroic Christians like virtuous competitors. St. Paul, for example, knew the rhetoric of Greek sport: he compared the disciplined training that athletes needed to win a victory crown to the discipline Christians needed to win the crown of salvation (1st *Corinthians* 9.24–7). He used sporting metaphors not to espouse Greek athletics but to attract possible pagan converts by “speaking their language” (Pfitzner 1967, 2013).²

Western Christendom cherishes lurid stories and images of intolerant Roman despots condemning innocent Christians to torments and death in the arena. What Romans saw as justified prosecutorial punishment of antisocial and subversive criminals, later Christian tradition condemned as religious persecution of pious souls by wicked pagans doomed to the agonies of Hell (e.g., Lactant. *Persec.*).

Christians eagerly documented traditions about devoted and heroic early saints and martyrs (Bowersock 1995, 23–39). The *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius, a Christian apologist, flatterer of Constantine, and bishop of Caesarea (c. 260–339 CE), narrates detailed information on procedures and torments.³ Various emerging Christian communities recorded accounts of martyrdoms (passions, martyr acts, martyrologies) that mixed early records with motifs of sacrifice, noble death, imitation of Christ, and apocalyptic visions.⁴ Prudentius, a Christian Latin poet of the Late Empire, was eager to retell the agonies of early martyrs but he admitted the paucity of records about them (*Perist.* 1.73).

Most extant martyrologies were composed long—sometimes centuries—after the event. Reverential hagiographies depict martyr-saints as models of Christian virtue whose “relics” (purported remains credited with talismanic potency) were sought after for churches and for salvation. However problematic as historical documents, such texts help us understand the interactions among victims, officials, and spectators.

Christian attitudes to shows: condemnation and abstention

Condemning Greco-Roman spectacles on moral and religious grounds, Christian leaders sought to distinguish and distance their Christian identity from traditional pagan entertainments. They urged followers to stay apart and not be corrupted by mixing with pagans at shows. Most stringently, Tertullian (c. 198–205) in his *On the Spectacles* fervently rejected paganism and its customs. He protested that all forms of Greco-Roman spectacles were idolatrous (*De spect.* 4–13), rooted from their origins in worship of the dead, motivated by Satan, and incompatible with Christian piety.⁵ Christian writers also condemned all entertainment venues (the stadium, circus, arena, and theater) as realms of Satan replete with chthonic symbolism.

Early Christians put care of the soul uppermost, but they were not entirely hostile to the pursuit of good health (Bottomley 1979). As God's creation (Paul, 1st *Cor.* 6.19–20) the body was not inherently evil, and Christ himself was both man and god. Since Christians lived in the world, the body should be cared for, but it should not be put to evil and idolatrous purposes. Some Christians were reasonably tolerant of Greek sport, but they had to condemn the excessive or improper use of God's gifts in Roman spectacles that disquieted and corrupted souls (Wiedemann 1992, 146–60; Winter 1998).

Christians were warned that attending any contests or combats would deny them any hope of salvation and eternal life. Weaning potential Christians from spectacular diversions, however, took time, and there were failures. St. Augustine's oft-cited story (*Conf.* 6.8) suggests that some Christians succumbed to the allure and passions of the arena. Apparently his student Alypius, who had disdained gladiatorial combats, was forced by friends to attend the amphitheater. There the sight of blood transfixed, exhilarated, and corrupted him into an enthusiastic spectator, so deranged that he would return for more. As Tertullian said (*De spect.* 30), Christians should condemn and avoid Roman spectacles and focus on the spectacle of salvation to come.⁶

Discussing Christian opposition to arena shows, R. Dunkle (2008, 201–6) notes that, like pagan critics, Christian critics seem to know a lot about the shows: "Christian polemicists ... had little negative effect on gladiator games. The average Christian took very little (or no) notice of critics of the games. Christians attended the games and took pleasure in them despite admonitions not to attend" (203).

Roman Reactions to Christians

Having long tolerated monotheistic Jews, Romans simply dismissed early Christians as another incomprehensible Jewish sect. In time, however, Romans became perplexed by what they saw as the Christians' irrational faith

and religious exclusivism, their worship of an executed criminal as a god, and their defiance, disobedience, and avoidance of Rome's traditional rituals and entertainments. To reject spectacles was to reject Rome.

Nero publicized Christianity when he persecuted Christians as scapegoats to absolve himself of suspicions that he had ordered the great fire at Rome in 64 CE. Years later Tacitus (*Ann.* 15.44.3–8) recorded the events to excoriate Nero as a bad emperor. Tacitus agreed that the Christians were guilty and deserved ruthless punishment for their “abominations” and their “mischievous superstition” (similarly Suet. *Ner.* 16.2). Christians were thought to be guilty of “hatred against mankind” (15.44.5 *odio humanis generis*) in part because they shunned Roman sacrifices and spectacles—the very things Romans saw as essential for integration into society. Nero, notorious for lavish shows and overly sensitive to critical rumors, hurriedly had the judicial system round up and convict Christians to be punished as a spectacular entertainment. Tacitus’ “immense multitude” (15.44.5 *multitudo ingens*) may be rhetorical; we have no exact number. Trying to demonstrate order and control after disruption and disaster, Nero inflicted elaborate punishments on the Christians to heighten their torments and to make their guilt (and his innocence) more convincing. Nero’s methods of execution (victims were covered with beasts’ skins and attacked by dogs, or crucified and later set afire), however, were not invented specifically for Christians. The “fatal charades” of the early Empire already had an array of methods of torture, humiliation, and aggravated death (see [Chapter 15](#)).

After noting that the self-indulgent Nero made the spectacle his own and not the people’s by holding it in his own gardens, and that he made a spectacle of himself by appearing inappropriately as a charioteer, Tacitus suggests that the victims aroused a sense of pity (*miseratio*) because they suffered due to Nero’s brutality rather than in the national interest (15.44.5). Nevertheless, like the sense of “fellowship” of men and elephants attributed to spectators at Pompey’s games (see [Chapter 14](#)), any “pity” saved no victims.

Nero’s persecution was exceptional and the only attested early policy on Christians comes from Trajan’s correspondence of 112 CE with Pliny the Younger (*Ep.* 19.96–7), governor of Bithynia. Trajan instructed Pliny not to hunt for Christians and to allow Christians to go free if they respected the emperor cult (accepting the emperor as divine) by offering a minimal sacrifice on an altar or wearing a wreath. Only if they refused should they be punished (in a manner at the governor’s discretion, including death).

A change from early sporadic to systematic persecutions in the third century was influenced by several factors, including the major growth of Christianity, suspicion, and anxiety in the context of natural disasters, political turmoil, and military instability in a beleaguered empire. Suspected Christians were brought to court and charged with heresy (*superstitio*), treason (*maiestas*), or obstinacy (*contumacia*). Their declarations of their faith and their refusal to

offer sacrifice on behalf of the emperors (Tert. *Apol.* 10.1) could be taken as treasonous obstinacy and provided adequate grounds for levying capital charges against them. Unrepentant self-professed Christians who accepted their punishment were later hailed as “martyrs.”

At public trials, crowds of curious or hostile spectators gathered and interacted, loudly voicing their sentiments and outrage, commenting on the magistrates and the proceedings, affecting verdicts, and demanding certain degrees and forms of punishments.⁷ Such effective participation and life or death empowerment by commoners recalls spectators’ interactions with officials at games and involvement in outcomes of gladiatorial combats.

Punishments of Christians were not unique, nor were they the most prominent or recurrent elements in spectacles. Against the perspective of Roman arena executions (e.g., *damnatio ad bestias*), the objectives and practices of executing Christians differed little from traditional ultimate punishments (*summa supplicia*) of non-Christians. Martyrologies detail hideous but not fundamentally new horrors.

However reluctantly, we should see the persecution of Christians in the light of the Romans’ conviction that their success depended on observance of proper rituals and respect for their gods (Kyle 1998, 242–64). To Romans, the Christians’ exclusiveness and denial of the existence of pagan gods constituted a serious threat to public order. Roman officials ordered public punishments of properly prosecuted Christians as deviant and defiant criminals. Such public executions, often performed in circuses or arenas, and often making use of beasts and arena procedures and personnel from shows, were integrated into spectacles watched and sanctioned by crowds, as they had witnessed and approved of the aggravated executions of pagan criminals and prisoners of war for centuries. For Rome, the death penalty was not controversial.

Some famous martyrs

Examples from the *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Musurillo 1972) reveal the procedures and ideology of martyrdom, as well as the style and messages of our sources. Accounts typically include the Christians’ defiance of authorities, calmness, bravery, and their confidence in resurrection and salvation. Their threats of divine judgment of the persecutors sometimes seem to have provoked special animosity or corpse abuse by enraged spectators or frustrated officials.⁸ Also, some female Christians suffered extreme humiliations and brutal torments for their effrontery in bravely challenging gender norms of behavior.

Writing in the early fourth century, Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 5.1.3–63) recounts the martyrdom of Blandina and others at Lyon (Lugdunum) in 177 CE.⁹ In place of expensive gladiatorial combats, a group of self-professed Christians

suffered tortures to provide an economical spectacle, one sanctioned by the emperor Marcus Aurelius. Blandina, a slave in poor health, remarkably was the last to die; she was tied to a post and exposed to beasts, but they would not attack her. Finally she was put in a net and exposed to a bull that killed her. Eusebius draws attention to the Blandina's triumph in enduring ordeals and winning salvation. Refusing to recant, Christians apparently calmly endured torments, threatened their punishers with judgment, and swore they would be resurrected. At Lyon such defiance frustrated spectators and led not only to repeated severe punishments but to the utter destruction of the corpses that were left exposed to dogs for six days and guarded by soldiers to prevent burial. Finally, the remains were reduced to ashes and thrown in the River Rhône to deny them resurrection.

The *Passion* of St. Perpetua and her companions (*Pass. Perp. et Fel.*) alludes to Geta's birthday games at Carthage in 203, but it was composed c. 206 CE. It presents historiographical challenges (e.g., her dreams as evidence) and raises issues about the social status of women in Carthage.¹⁰ Perpetua, a well-born and educated woman of Carthage, was imprisoned with her slave Felicitas and others, and she gave birth there. She repeatedly rejected her father's requests that she recant her conversion, and she dreamt of ascending a ladder up to heaven, which she took to presage her death. On the eve of the spectacle, she had a vision of herself stripped for a combat with the Devil, whom she defeated for Christ (10.7). Before the spectacle, the Christian men and women refused to wear the robes of priests of Saturn or priestesses of Ceres (18.4, i.e., as roles in a fatal charade), which has led some scholars to see the events as human sacrifices to Saturn and Ceres as gods associated with the underworld and possible surrogates for Baal. When Perpetua and Felicitas were exposed naked (or in diaphanous outfits), the crowd, perhaps touched by their ages and conditions (one was pregnant, one had recently delivered; 20.2), asked that they be clothed.¹¹ The text mentions that the Christians preferred to die with their colleagues and not later with common criminals (15.2). When the male Christians threatened that God would condemn the Governor Hilarius as he had condemned them, the enraged crowd demanded that they be scourged before a line of gladiators (18.9). In the arena, the victims did not try to defend themselves but rather cooperated by walking out and attracting beasts with signals. Perpetua herself was attacked by a wild cow but remained alive. Still angry, the crowd demanded to witness the cutting of the martyrs' throats. Not just willing but eager for the glory of martyrdom, Perpetua even directed a young gladiator's trembling sword hand to her throat (21.7–10).

Rome's failure: Christians spoil the show

Ironically, Christians apparently proved unsatisfactory as performers by not playing the game by the rules. Christian author Origen (*C. Cels.* 8.44) remarks

that spectators were upset by Christians who calmly endured torture, but they were delighted if Christians lost their composure or showed terror. Some, if perhaps not all, Christian victims frustrated crowds by facing death courageously. They denied spectators the expected sight of terrified, abject Roman enemies begging for mercy.

Unrepentant before Rome's might, Christians performed their piety by accepting torments bravely, confident of their resurrection and eternal life to come. It was especially galling for Roman men that courageous female martyrs seemed to usurp traditionally masculine military virtues; they earned and accepted a noble death like defeated gladiators but without appealing for release. The Christians' willingness, even eagerness, to die for their faith mocked Roman traditions of punishing criminals publically as a deterrent to crime and as a socially restorative and satisfying entertainment (Shaw 1996).

It remains astonishing that humble Christians tranquilly faced excruciating deaths, but some Christian sources perhaps put higher truths above factual accuracy. Also, different Christian communities, especially before Constantine's mandate of orthodoxy at the Council of Nicaea in 325, competed with each other in support of their types of Christology and perhaps in fostering accounts (and numbers) of their local martyrs and saints. Not to trivialize an ugly chapter in Roman history, ultimately Christian deaths in the arena proved more significant for later Christianity than for contemporary Rome.

The Waning of Institutionalized Shows in the West

Scholars are reexamining assumptions about the demise of traditional entertainments in the Western Roman Empire in Late Antiquity.¹² Was the process a matter of edicts or economics? Were the games abolished or abandoned?

Christianity certainly had ideological and historical reasons to criticize Roman entertainments, and Christian opposition was significant in the "decline and fall" of pagan sports and spectacles, but the triumph of Christianity did not immediately or absolutely eradicate all ancient sport and spectacle. Long-standing traditions in leisure do not die overnight, for states cannot simply legislate morality or propriety in recreation. As with modern prohibitions of gambling, cockfighting, and dogfights, the phenomena persist in reduced, non-sanctioned forms for generations. Rather, secular and logistical factors, notably economics, imperial collapse, and problems of supply, arguably also doomed the major public shows of antiquity.

The waning of Greco-Roman games is best seen as a gradual development. Looking at the remains of venues, Roueché (2007) notes that trends away from expensive athletic contests, gymnasia, and gladiators, and the flourishing of smaller scale beast shows are evidenced archeologically in conversions of

stadia (e.g., at Aphrodisias) to serve as small arenas, but horseraces and factions continued into the 570s. As she says (60), the state of structures “... suggest change of use, rather than abandonment.”

Lingering Greek athletics

Greek games faced Christian opposition due to their associations with pagan festivals, nudity, eroticism, and celebration of the athletic body, but archaeology suggests that the Olympics, altered but alive, endured better and longer than we had thought. In the context of imperial decline, the ends of the Olympics and other contests were gradual and unspectacular.

In 1994, German archaeologists at Olympia working on the training center or “clubhouse” near the Southwest Baths (see [Chapter 15](#)) found a fragment of a bronze plaque with several new names of victors. This extended the last known Olympic victors from 369 to 385 CE, with an Athenian boys’ boxing victor, Aurelius Zopyros, as last on the list (Ebert 1997). Also, the headquarters of the synod of athletes at Rome, granted by Hadrian and achieved by Antoninus Pius (see [Chapter 15](#)), has been discovered on the Esquiline with athletic inscriptions, including one erected between 384 and 392 in praise of the wrestler John of Smyrna (*IGUR*, 245), so combat athletes were still active and applauded near the end of the fourth century CE.

Contrary to earlier assumptions, Theodosius I’s ban on pagan cults in 393 CE did not abruptly end the Olympics, although Theodosius II’s destruction of the Temple of Zeus in 426 may have hurt the games.¹³ Stratigraphy suggests that the Olympic stadium was left open and possibly housed games into the fifth century before invasions and natural disasters finally turned the site into a ruin in the sixth century (Sinn 2000, 119–29). Ironically, the latest continuing “Olympic” Games were those at Antioch in Syria, which survived until banned by Emperor Justin in 520 CE.¹⁴

Fewer gladiators

Christian flattery attributes to Emperor Constantine a ban on gladiatorial combats in 325, but Potter (2010, 2012, 313–4) shows that Constantine did not intend to end gladiatorial combats. Rather, with a focus on the eastern provinces, he wanted to end the capital penalty of *damnatio ad ludum*, which forced convicts to fight combats to the death in arenas.

Also, Ville (1960, 326–9) rejects the old story that a crowd stoned to death a monk named Telemachos for interfering in a gladiatorial show, leading to the end of such shows (Theodoret *Hist. Eccles.* 5.26). The Christian Emperor Honorius supposedly closed the remaining gladiator schools at Rome in 399 and formally banned gladiatorial combats in 404, but any ban was ineffective except at Rome (see Wiedemann 1992, 157–9). Gladiatorial combats largely had died out in the East by the mid fourth century, but they persisted in the

western provinces. We have no evidence of an official edict of closure,¹⁵ but ultimately gladiatorial shows, facing continuing economic shortages and Christian condemnation, gradually disappeared.¹⁶

Changing beast shows

Beast spectacles faced no sustained Christian opposition,¹⁷ and they apparently flourished as gladiatorial combats decreased; but Rome's shrinking territories, especially in North Africa, brought a shortage of magnificent and exotic beasts (Bomgardner 2000, 211–19). The letters and experiences of the wealthy senatorial Symmachus, a pagan opponent of Christianity, in making arrangements for celebrating games at Rome for his son (393, 401 CE) show the problems of declining infrastructure and supply in the Late Empire. Despite his status and connections, Symmachus (*Ep.* 2.46) had trouble assembling wild beasts (e.g., bears, lions, antelope, and crocodiles) and securing horses and drivers for chariot races, and his 29 Saxon prisoners committed suicide in their barracks (Gregori 2001, 96–7; Jones 2012, 305–6).

Beast shows continued in the West and East into the sixth century, albeit on a reduced scale, with bear-baiting, bullfights, and lesser and local beasts, often spared or trained as performers. An earthquake damaged the Colosseum in 429, but it was repaired c. 439. Ostrogothic King Theodoric staged the last known beast shows in Rome in 519 and 523 (Cassiod. *Var.* 5.42.1–2; 11), but shows continued in Byzantium well into the first half of the sixth century (Bomgardner 2000, 219–20; Dunkle 2008, 241–4).

Early sixth-century Byzantine consular diptychs (two writing tablets hinged together with carvings on the outer surfaces) such as ones honoring games staged by Anastasius (517) and Areobindus (506) (see Vismara 2001) depict mixed shows with acrobats and beasts (Jones 2012, 322–3; see [Figure 16.1](#)). Rather than men killing beasts, performers now more often baited animals and then escaped them by acrobatic moves, vaulting poles, baskets on ropes, and types of rotating apparatus (Bomgardner 2000, 217–18; Jones 2012, 321–3). The last known beast show in Constantinople was in 537, but they were not ordered abandoned until 681 CE.



Figure 16.1 Circus scene on Diptych of Anastasius, Consul in 517 CE; Cabinet des Medailles, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

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Chariot Racing in the Christian Byzantine Empire

As poverty and insecurity undid the system of spectacles in the West, chariot racing declined, and the last known chariot race in Rome was in 549 under the Goths (Meijer 2010, 150–3). In the East, however, Constantinople was the Christian capital of an imperial and comparatively well-off Byzantine Empire. Roman-style chariot racing, with charioteers and not owners as victors, became popular in the East from *c.* 400 on and continued, with some difficulties, into the eleventh century.¹⁸ Located adjacent to the imperial palace and connected to it by a passageway to the emperor's box (*kathisma*), the hippodrome at Constantinople, like the Circus Maximus, was decorated with obelisks, statues, and lap markers (see Figure 16.2). Roman-style factions appeared in the East in the late fifth century, and former charioteers (*factionarii*) were prominent in the management of racing (Rouché 2007, 62–4; Jones 2012, 313–5). Although the imperial administration took over chariot racing and standardized and bureaucratized its operation in the empire, the factions still assisted in official ceremonies and acclamations of the emperor.

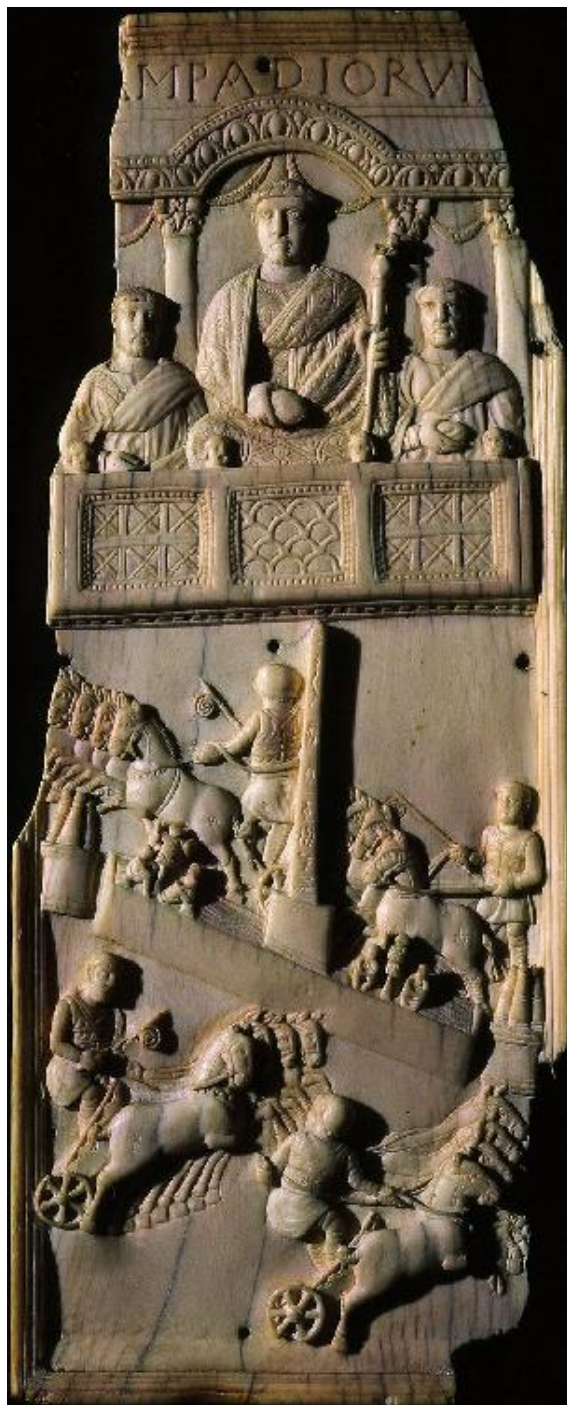


Figure 16.2 Lampadii Ivory Diptych chariot scene in Circus, c. 430 CE, Quadriga race in Hippodrome of Constantinople, Museo Civico Cristiano Brescia, Italy.

Byzantine chariot racing thrived and reached its height c. 500–540 because of the popularity of star charioteers and also perhaps because of the decline of beast shows and pantomimes. A. Cameron’s *Porphyrius* (1973) reconstructs the life and career of a famous Byzantine charioteer who raced at Antioch and then at Constantinople, and who was the first charioteer to be honored with a statue in the hippodrome while still competing.

Cameron’s work on circus factions (1976) thoroughly examines the factions and public entertainments in the Roman and Byzantine world. After discounting other interpretations, Cameron (as noted in [Chapter 14](#)) presents the popular Byzantine Blue and Green factions as “fan clubs” or “circus partisans,” numbering but a thousand or two but constituting an atypically aggressive minority of spectators (1976, 74–5).

Circus spectatorship at Rome and Constantinople differed significantly. While most emperors at Rome were attentive to the popular expressions of the spectators’ wishes, Byzantine emperors were distant and haughty, so tensions between the emperors and the people contributed to the volatility of crowds at races. Beginning in the fifth century, the factions’ strong sporting rivalry was largely responsible for the outbreaks of non-political violence in and near the hippodrome.

The hippodrome in Constantinople was the site of many riots, most famously the Nika riots of 532.¹⁹ With Emperor Justinian (527–65 CE) apparently mishandling the situation by his inconsistency (Greatrex 1997), the riot lasted six days. Ultimately, spurred by Empress Theodora, who was no stranger to the circus or stage (she was an actress like her mother and her father was a bear keeper for the Greens), Justinian quashed the riot with troops, leaving some 30,000 dead (Procop. 1.24.54). Suggested causes of the riot include religious and political tensions between the Blues and the Greens, the support of the Blues by Justinian and Theodora, and mass discontent with the administration’s excessive taxation.

Following Cameron’s view of the rioters simply as violently passionate “fans,” D. Parnell (2014) sees multiple factors leading to the numerous circus riots, but he suggests that factional public violence had become a form of mass “sport” entailing personal competition, aggression, and team spirit—an intense, emotional physical outlet for competitive young Byzantine men who, in the absence of organized athletic competitions, enjoyed rioting for the sake of rioting.

How ironic that soccer hooliganism and urban riots after professional or college teams lose—or win—remain a blight on contemporary sport.

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Notes

- 1 On Jewish reactions to spectacles, see Weiss (1996) and MacLean (2014, 585–7). Weiss (1999) notes the spread of pagan entertainments in the Levant in the second and third centuries CE.
- 2 On Christian literary athletic metaphors, also see Jones (2011).
- 3 Noting similarities in language and imagery, Frilingos (2004) relates the book of *Revelation* to the viewing of Roman spectacles. Elements of spectacles in *Revelation*, including beasts and torments, the dynamics of viewing, constructions of gender, and theatricality, suggest that *Revelation* was a product of Roman culture, which itself was displayed and viewed in arena shows.
- 4 Challenging assumptions about lengthy and extensive persecutions, Moss (2012, 2013) suggests that ideologies of martyrdom were not uniform but varied in different cultural contexts, and that accounts of martyrdom were exaggerated to inspire Christians and combat heresy.
- 5 As noted in Chapter 13, Tertullian (*De spect.* 12) claimed that gladiatorial fights began as human sacrifices because Romans believed that spirits of the dead craved human blood. Mammel (2014, 609–14) surveys Jewish and Christian religious objections and critical writings concerning Roman spectacles.

- 6 See Castelli (2004, 104–33) for Christian notions that their apocalyptic visions rivaled Roman spectacles.
- 7 Potter (1993, 63–71, 1996, 147–59); Fagan (2011, 133–7).
- 8 De Ste Croix et al. (2006) broadly treats martyrdom, burial, and resurrection; also see Bynum (1995, 19–58). Kyle (1998, 242–64) discusses Christians in spectacles and the treatment of their bodies and corpses. On Ignatius and Polycarp, see Kyle (1998, 245–6); Thompson (2002).
- 9 He quotes from a letter written by the Christian communities of Lyon and Vienne; Kyle (1998, 248–51); Moss (2012, 100–21).
- 10 See Dunkle’s treatment of the events (2008, 220–26). Whether the whole diary is original or was fashioned by a male editor/redactor or composer (especially the account of the deaths in the arena) has long been debated; see Shaw (1993, 36–45); Bowersock (1995, 32–4); Bremmer (2002). For recent essays (e.g., on issues of authenticity, Perpetua’s degree of authorship, the editor’s impact, use of other materials such as court records), see Bremmer and Formosiano (2012).
- 11 See Shaw (1993, 7–9, 16–19) and Frankfurter (2009) on the related issues of patriarchal male spectatorship, female nudity and suffering, and the use of bulls and other male beasts in especially humiliating punishments to dishonor female victims. On Perpetua’s complicity as empowerment, see Perkins (1994).
- 12 For example, see Roueché (2007); Jones (2012); Potter (2012, 308–20).
- 13 Roueché (2007, 61–2). Weiler (1985–1986) surveys scholarship on the decline and end of the Olympics. See Weiler (2004) on Theodosius’ policies and opinions about sport. On the persistence of games, now see Gutsfeld and Lehmann (2013).
- 14 Jones (2012, 307–9), suggests that sixth-century “athletes” were not competitors but performers in shows.
- 15 Wiedemann (1992, 92, 155–6, 1995) suggests that Christian notions of resurrection and salvation replaced the “resurrection” of gladiators via release and freedman status, but the collapse of infrastructure and of resources seem more compelling factors.
- 16 Gregori (2001, 96–7); Dunkle (2008, 201–6).
- 17 Epplett (2004) argues that the short-lived ban of the fifth-century Byzantine Emperor Anastasius on all forms of *venationes* probably related to his opposition to condemning persons *ad bestias*.

- 18 Cameron's works (1973, 1976) on Byzantine charioteers, circus factions, and the circus in Byzantine life remain essential. For a detailed new French study, see Dagron (2011). For overviews, see Harris (1972, 238–43); Meijer (2010, 135–53).
- 19 Meijer (2010, 5–13, 136–9) offers a summary, but see Parnell's (2014) contextualization and narration of the Nika riot.

Conclusion: Ancient Sport and Spectacle

If you listen carefully to the words of the herald, you will see that he is announcing to the crowd that the games where prizes are given have come to an end

Philostratus, *Gymnastikos* 7, trans. W.E. Sweet

Whether we call it play, display, territorialism, agonism, or sport, early humans shared physicality, aggression, and instinctual drives to compete. Early societies channeled and ritualized those innate impulses into constructive or therapeutic games and performances. Every society has sport, but the nature of that sport is influenced by local historical conditions and cultural factors. Ideals and values affect the construction and articulation of excellence, virtue, and gender, but we should not over-intellectualize sport. The allure of playing and watching games has remained fundamentally visceral and elemental—more subliminal than cerebral.

The problem of categorizing competitive physical performances remains central to this study. The traditional typology asserts a stark, moralistic, and anachronistic dichotomy between sports and spectacles, but sport history suggests a spectrum of performances with considerable overlap and compatibility. The labeling of activities as sports or spectacles is largely a matter of scale and perspective. Yes, Greek sport was more participatory and Roman spectacles were more spectatory, and Greek competitors were citizens but most Roman performers were not, but sport and spectacle were complementary. In both cultures, some performed, some produced, and most watched spectacular sport and sporting spectacles. Both Greek and Roman games included elements of competitiveness, aggression, danger, and eroticism. Both had mass appeal and faced elitist, intellectual criticism. When states institutionalize sporting contests, sport becomes spectacular, and competitive spectacles are more engaging and entertaining when staged with sporting integrity (e.g., rules and fairness), unpredictability, and emotional investment by fans in winners and losers. Skill and suspense turn aggression and action into sports and spectacles to be watched and not just seen.

Our broad scope helps suggest some patterns in the historical emergence and persistence of sporting and spectacular phenomena. Smaller groups, villages, and towns, wherein a limited population of similar people can gather for festivals or funerals, are more likely to have participatory physical contests, internally or with culturally similar neighbors, to release tension and sublimate aggression, to clarify social status and order, and to entertain and

recreate the community. The contests could include violence but not the intentional killing of fellows, and there would be some form of victory recognition and celebration. Traditionally we have privileged such activities as “sport,” with positive connotations of natural, healthy rivalry among virtuous competitors. When sporting contests are held among several communities, more talented and accomplished competitors are recognized, in Greek terms, as “athletes.”

Enduring at the local level, usually in the context of festivals at rural sanctuaries or within towns, sports have visual and performative aspects as collective rituals of community. From the Near East to Greece, as communities become cities (or city-states), “civic” athletics develop as the state becomes heavily involved in coordinating the games, which themselves become more spectacular—being staged more elaborately before larger groups of spectators. All complex societies, with more resources, with larger populations incorporating formerly separate social groups, and with more political centralization, have spectacles. Sporting contests persist, but within an increasingly spectacular framework. Sport and spectacle, then, are mutually reinforcing, not mutually exclusive.

Civilization and spectacle are synchronic and symbiotic. Complex societies, large cities or states and especially empires, with more people in hierarchical classes, with greater territories and military concerns, and with autocratic centralizations of political power, need more elaborate spectacular performances as forms of communication and rituals of power. A spectacle model, arising in the hydraulic civilizations of Bronze Age Mesopotamia and Egypt, entailed physical performances associated with the royal court. Trained performers gave entertaining physical demonstrations, and monarchs ritually and predictably achieved feats (e.g., running, hunting, and archery) that communicated royal power and cosmic and social order. Also, to affirm territorial control, empires fostered more violent spectacles: humans and animals suffered and often died in orchestrated combats and royal hunts.

Ironically, the classic models of sport or athletics appear in later areas beyond the fringes of the early great civilizations. In addition to Homeric funeral games with probable ties to the Geometric period, the idealized early Greek model was an interstate (later Panhellenic) sanctuary festival—the Olympic games. With no large resident population at Olympia, the games were run by the decentralized, largely tribal state of Elis. Due to its location and oracle, as well as colonization, aristocratic display, rivalry among states, and other factors, the Olympic model spread and influenced both Panhellenic and local games.

Archaic Greece was a land of emerging city-states—small, independent political units with some urban political center, usually run by aristocracies, and usually suspicious of monarchy, external threats, and larger political units. At Athens and also at less urbanized Sparta, earlier contests, cults, and

rites of passage of clans, tribes, and sub-communities were incorporated or “nationalized” within civic festival calendars as contests supported and supervised by the city-state. With local variations from Sparta’s female nudity to Athens’ torch races, civic athletics also incorporated adaptations of the Olympic model, for example, in procedures, truces, events, and crowns. Civic athletics were sacred but also chrematitic: from early roots in funeral games, city-states offered materially valuable prizes to publicize their products and wealth, and to attract outside competitors. They also began honoring and materially rewarding citizen athletes who won at the great crown games. As some cities became larger, richer, and even imperialistic, their agonistic festivals, notably the Panathenaia of Classical Athens, became more extravagant, approximating earlier Near Eastern spectacles.

The Peloponnesian War showed the deficiencies of the city-state format, but Greece was not unified until Philip of Macedon took over, using his prestigious associations with Panhellenic games to present himself as an acceptable Greek leader. Macedon’s control of Greece and interaction with the Near East brought dramatic changes in the later fourth century, heralded by the appearance at Nemea and elsewhere of elaborate architectural stadium complexes with more obvious attention to spectators and spectacular effects.

After Alexander assimilated the Near Eastern models of kingship and spectacles, and founded numerous cities that spread Greek athletic facilities and traditions over vast territories, the Hellenistic Era was a spectacular age of statecraft and stagecraft. Hellenistic kingdoms and empires, notably Ptolemaic Egypt, maintained eclectic programs of spectacular performances with new festivals, processions, banquets, and athletics, all with royal support and supervision. Hellenistic kings might still participate in royal hunts and appear prominently at their shows, or seek legitimacy indirectly through equestrian victories in Greece, but they were to be superhuman producers, not fallible, physical competitors, at games in their own states. The association of Hellenistic spectacles with non-European cultures and autocracy contributed to the traditional dichotomy that hallowed Greek athletics as admirably and exceptionally masculine, pure, and democratic. Indeed, Hellenistic monarchs, like Near Eastern emperors earlier, used sport and spectacles to reinforce their sociopolitical superiority. Also like earlier rulers, however, they recognized, tolerated, and even encouraged local and municipal sporting traditions. The Greek civic model of agonistic festivals, with its local popularity and benefits, endured in cities in the Hellenistic world (and later in the Greek East of the Roman Empire). Sport and spectacle together assisted order and assimilation.

Early Rome had its own native traditions of rustic rituals and equestrian contests in festivals, but Etruscan influences added more spectacular elements and strengthened the predisposition to spectatorship. As a Latin city-state, the early Republic had its equestrian and scenic shows, tied into its religious calendar and central to its civic life, but most performers were lesser non-

citizens watched by the citizen population. Put on by Rome but through commercial businesses, chariot races used foreign, slave, or hired drivers (as many Greek victors had), but they were thrilling competitions before excited and knowledgeable fans. With affinities to Greek and Etruscan traditions, Roman chariot races had the largest facility and the largest crowds. They were the most popular, the most frequent (after theatrical shows), and the longest living Roman spectacles—starting well before and long outlasting gladiatorial combats.

From Assyrian to Roman spectacles, ancient history demonstrates that civilization and spectacular cruelty (real, stylized, threatened, or symbolic) were compatible and, at some level, codependent. As Rome expanded beyond Italy, it emerged into a Hellenistic world with entrenched, overlapping traditions of Near Eastern spectacle and Greek (civic and international) sport. As Rome fought war after war and acquired a territorial empire in the Middle Republic, great generals staged more elaborate and flattering triumphs with prisoners and plunder, and Rome experimented with imported novelties including displays of exotic animals (and hunts of African beasts and an athletic display by 186 BCE). The experimentation included a modest gladiatorial combat in 264, but after Cannae in 216, human and animal combats in *munera* grew rapidly in frequency, size, and popularity. Rich with symbolic messages about virtue and social order, these combats appealed to Roman militarism. Gladiators became professional entertainers and, as recent studies and gladiator burials indicate, their combats evolved into agonistic performances—not human sacrifices, bloodthirsty executions, or butchery “to the death.”

Roman generals who had fought in the East occasionally staged Greek athletic performances, and Rome incorporated aspects and prizes from Greek sport (e.g., starting mechanisms, wreaths and palm fronds, finger submission signals) into the circus and arena. The eclectic shows of the 160s BCE reflect an active discourse on sport and spectacle between Rome and the East. Rome conquered the East and incorporated many Near Eastern aspects of spectacle. Near Eastern performances at court became performances at the Roman arena and circus—as the new “court”—with the Roman people (and later the emperor) in the stands.

In the Late Republic, *munera*, which were traditionally linked to funerals, triumphs, and other spectacles, were dangerously politicized by rival leaders who pushed Rome into civil war. Rome’s transition into a stable, autocratic imperial power was achieved under the Augustan principate, and it was assisted by Augustus’ inclusive systematization of Roman society and leisure. His breadth of vision and administration, and his harmonizing of Greek and Roman traditions, included an eclectic, cosmopolitan program of public entertainments, with circus games, well-controlled, tripartite, imperial *munera*, and also Greek athletics. The Roman spectacle model, with close

associations to the emperors and the emperor cult, helped bond and sustain the Empire.

When Rome acquired provinces in the Greek East, it recognized local sporting traditions, and Greek agonistic festivals prospered in the wider Roman world. After early reservations, Greek sport at Rome became accepted and institutionalized under the early Empire. Greek exercises became common at Rome's baths, the headquarters of the international guild of star athletes moved to Rome, and, with Nero and Domitian, Rome gained athletic contests and a stadium. With attentive Philhellenic emperors and benefactors, notably Hadrian and Herodes Atticus, Olympia experienced a renaissance in building, activity, and literary attention, in the Second Sophistic. Still august and spectacular, the Olympics had a glorious and a long life.

Rome imported aspects of spectacles, and it also exported Roman spectacles of both the circus and the arena to the provinces. After some initial resistance, the Greek East assimilated Roman traditions to a greater degree than some Hellenists cared to admit. Proliferating agonistic festivals in the cities of the Greek East included both Greek athletics and Roman combat sports. Games at the local civic and sanctuary level flourished under the aegis of Rome. The vitality and variety of local sporting events—from cheese-stealing team events at Sparta to dismounting chariot races at Athens to a torch race in armor at Gafsa—were compounded with traveling troupes of beast-fighters and gladiators. As Hadrian's firm instructions about finances and the scheduling of major games demonstrate, the emperor, the imperial administration, and the emperor cult provided institutionalization and regularity for both (traditionally) Greek and Roman entertainments. At games, the power of emperors and the Empire was acclaimed, but much of the emotionalism was local. Winning at Epidauros or Aphrodisias was like "going to state." The local and imperial levels were mutually reinforcing networks that created opportunities for the competitive advancement of performers, patrons, and partisans.

Emerging within an empire that represented itself through spectacles, early Christianity established its own counter-identity by its condemnation of pagan public entertainments, its fascination with martyrdom, and its distrust of the body. By the Late Empire Christianity had triumphed but it had to come to terms with a declining empire and a world that did not end as expected. Allying with legal traditions and rituals of emperorship, it upheld brutal punishments of criminals and the mistreatment of beasts in shows.

The gradual demise of Greco-Roman entertainments in the West was due in large part to the fall of the political-military strength of the Western Roman Empire. The demand persisted but the supply of human and animal performers dwindled with economic stresses from the third century on. Christian opposition also was a contributing factor, but the mortal malady was the demise of urban centers in the West, which meant the decline of the

entertainment industry at the imperial or ecumenical level.

In the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire, chariot racing and other forms of Roman entertainments (except gladiators) lived on longer than in the West, and even in the West, shows persisted only on a modest and localized level until replaced by the folk games and fairs of Medieval Europe. When cities revived and wealthy nation states emerged in early modern times, folk sport was set on the path to modern sporting spectacles.

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